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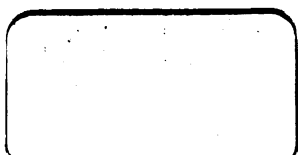
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A Son of the People

A Romance of the Hungarian Plains

By the

Baroness Orczy

Author of "The Scarlet Pimpernel," etc.



G. P. Putnam's Sons
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TO MY HUSBAND

Contents

PART I.

CHAPTER	PAGE
I.—A VILLAGE IN THE LOWLANDS	3
II.—A POPULAR FAVOURITE	13
III.—PRIDE OF RACE	18
IV.—THE MONEY-LENDER	26
V.—AN OLD MISER	39
VI.—THE TENANT OF KISFALU	54
VII.—PRINCIPAL AND INTEREST	60
VIII.—FIRST ARRIVALS	71
IX.—BEAUTIFUL ILONKA	80
X.—A LOVE IDYLL	91
XI.—THE GATHERING STORM	100
XII.—LORD AND PEASANT	114
XIII.—VENGEANCE	125
XIV.—CALAMITY	134
XV.—REPARATION	150

PART II.

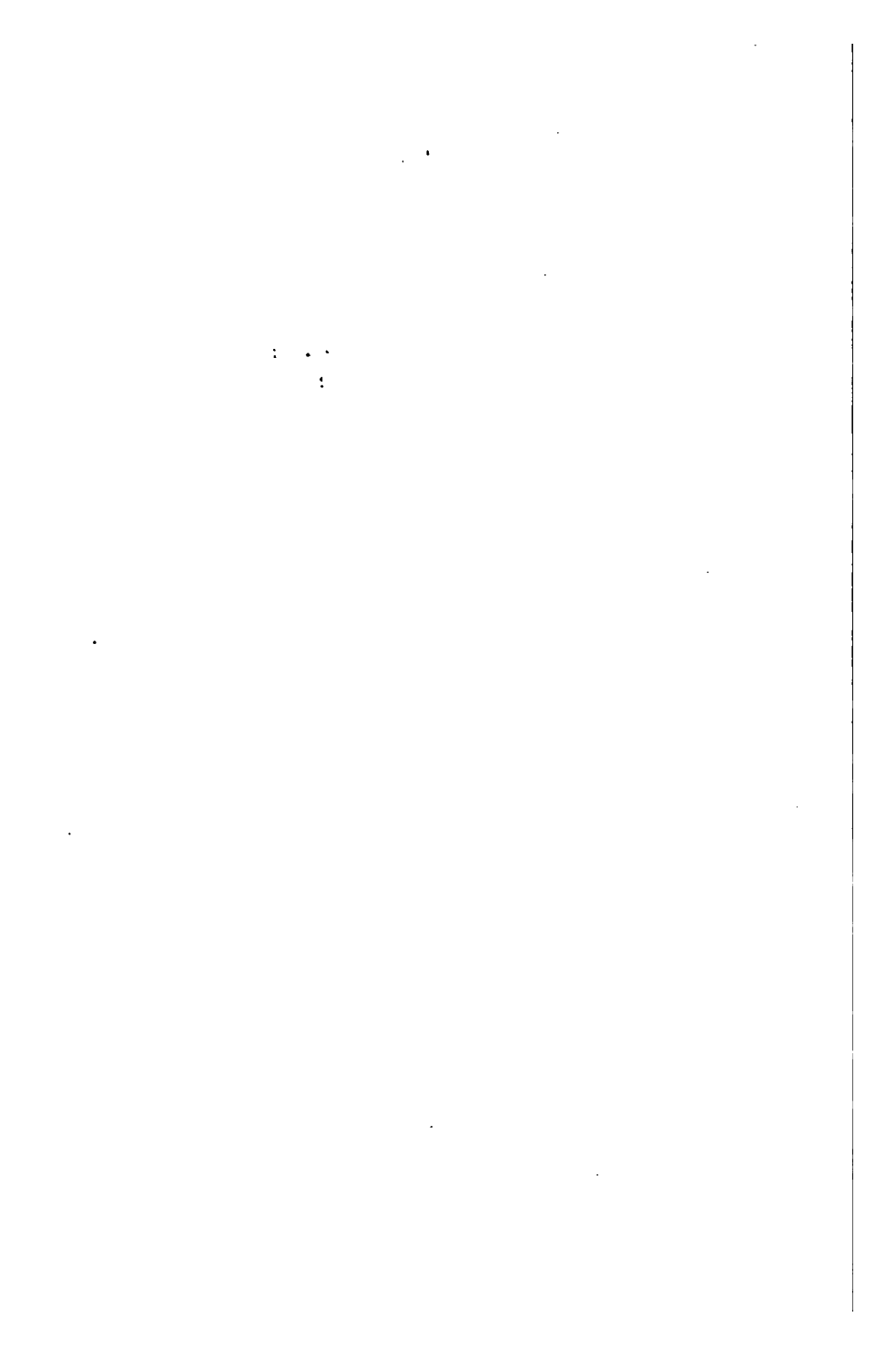
CHAPTER	PAGE
XVI.—EASTER MORN	165
XVII.—THE RUINED LORD	179
XVIII.—ROSENSTEIN, THE JEW	191
XIX.—A SON OF THE PEOPLE	206
XX.—THE ANSWER	220
XXI.—THE NOBLE LADY	224
XXII.—A DREAM	231
XXIII.—HOW THE NEWS WAS RECEIVED	234
XXIV.—THE MARRIAGE	248
XXV.—FATA MORGANA	260
XXVI.—THE PEASANT'S WIFE	263
XXVII.—THE IRREPARABLE	270

PART III.

XXVIII.—LOVE LIES BLEEDING	287
XXIX.—HONOUR THY FATHER AND THY MOTHER	300
XXX.—THE GRAVE OF LOVE	315
XXXI.—LOVE TRIUMPHANT	324
EPILOGUE	339

A SON OF THE PEOPLE

PART I



A Son of the People

CHAPTER I

A VILLAGE IN THE LOWLANDS

Do you love the mountains, English reader? the romantic peaks of the Rhine country, the poetic heights of the Alps, the more gently undulating slopes of your own South Downs? As for me, I must confess to an absorbing, a passionate fondness for the lowlands, the wild, mysterious plains of Hungary, that lie, deep down, between the Danube and the Theisz, and, whenever I stand on those vast *pusztas*,¹ it always seems to me that the mind must be more free, when the gaze can wander untrammelled to that far-distant horizon, which fancy can people at its own sweet will.

See how far away that horizon seems, there, where earth and sky meet in a soft-toned line of purple, the merging of the blue sky with the ruddy, sandy soil of the earth. The air trembles with the intense heat, and as the eye tries to define what lies beyond that mysterious vastness, lo! there suddenly rises on the distant horizon a vision of towers, minarets, and steeples, white and cool-looking, mirrored in some fairy pond that

¹ The *pusztas* are the vast sandy plains in the lowlands of Hungary.

must lie, somewhere — there — beyond where the eye can reach. Fondly it rests on the mystic, elusive picture, thrown on the blue canvas by the fairy hand of the fitful Fata Morgana; entranced, fancy pictures those towers and minarets, peopled with beings of some other world, half earthly, half heavenly, who have found birth in that immeasurable distance, which begins where vision ends. Blinded, the eye closes for one moment, as a respite from the golden vision, and lo! when it gazes again, towers and minarets have disappeared, and, far away, only a few melancholy weeping willows or a cluster of slender poplars break the even purple line of the skies. Fondly then, fancy dwells on its dreams, and hardly now dares to call real that distant, muffled sound, the gallop of a hundred hoofs, falling on the soft, dry earth. Perhaps it is a fairy sound, and that herd of wild horses, thundering past, their manes shaking, their tails lashing, are some fairy beasts belonging to the ghouls who dwell in Fata Morgana's distant minarets. Yet the sound is real enough; wildly the horses gallop past, followed by the *csikós* (herdsman) on his bare-backed mare, his white lawn shirt flying out like wings, as he passes, and cracking his lasso, as he drives his herd before him. For a moment all seems life upon the plain, for to the right and to the left the wild fowl rise affrighted overhead, and, on the ground, bright-coloured lizards rush nervously to and fro. Then the gallop dies away in the distance, the herdsman's whip has ceased to crack, the birds have gone to rest, and the mind is left wondering whether this bit of tumultuous life was not another day-dream, painted, and then erased by fancy.

Silence reigns again: a silence rendered absolute

through the drowsiness of all animal life, in the heat of the noonday sun. To the right and left, limitless fields of watermelons turn their huge, emerald-green carcasses towards the burning sun; beyond them, the golden sea of wheat, the waving plumes of maize, tremble and nod at every passing breeze, whilst, from everywhere, the sweet-scented rosemary throws a note of cool grey-green on the glowing colours of the soil. Far, very far away, a windmill stretches out its long wings, like a gigantic bird of prey, and right across the plain, the high-road, riddled with ruts, wanders northwards, towards Kecskemét. And that is all! Nothing more. Only sky, and earth, and vastness—immeasurable vastness—all one's own: to grasp, to understand, to love!

Midway between the two prosperous provincial towns of Kecskemét and Gyöngyös, on the very confines of the great Nádasdy plain, nestles the tiny village of Árokszállás, with its few thatched cottages, and its old mediæval church, cool and grey-looking, in the glare of the noonday sun. Near it, the presbytery, painted a brilliant yellow, with vivid emerald-green shutters, and surrounded by a small garden, where, amidst tall hollyhocks and fragrant mignonette, on hot summer afternoons, worthy old Pater Ambrosius wanders in his threadbare, well-worn cassock, telling his beads in a drowsy voice.

Then, there is the small *csárda* (wayside inn), with its thatched roof all on one side, for all the world like a tipsy peasant's hat, where, in the cool of the evenings, after the work is done, the herdsmen from the plain meet their friends from the village and smoke their pipes underneath the overhanging willow tree,

to the tune of a primitive gipsy band with their sweet-sounding fiddles and droning bag-pipe.

Then, if the innkeeper be not within sight, and his pretty young wife ready for a bit of flirtation and gossip, the latest eccentricities of the lord of Bideskút are discussed over a draught of good red wine.

What the peasantry of the county of Heves gossiped about before my lord started his craze for machinery and building, must certainly remain a puzzle; for since the remarkable contrivances of wood and iron, which reap the corn and bind it into sheaves without help of human hand, had first been established at Bideskút, they had remained the one all-absorbing topic of conversation.

The Hungarian peasant of the *alföld* (lowland) is an easy-going, lazy, cheerful, and usually good-tempered individual, well content with the numerous gifts God grants him in this land of plenty; but, in the matter of my lord's agricultural innovations, tempers had begun to run high, and, in spite of the fact that Kemény András, the most popular, as he was the most wealthy peasant farmer in the county, had refused to countenance such proceedings, nightly meetings were held at the inn, wherein universal condemnation was expressed of my lord and his misdoings.

Vas Berczi, who had once travelled on a railway between Kecskemét and Gyöngyös, and had arrived home again safe and sound, and who in consequence, was looked upon as an oracle, second only to Kemény András himself, had brought his rough brown fist with a crash upon the table; and, having expectorated on the ground with every sign of superstitious horror, had emphatically declared that it was impossible to

A Village in the Lowlands 7

grind corn into flour without touch of miller's hand, unless Satan himself did the work.

"But you don't mean to say, Berczi," said a young peasant, his bronzed cheek quite pale with terror, "that *that* is what my lord is going to do inside the building?"

Berczi nodded.

"I tell you, my children, that I have it from Jankó himself, my lord's valet, that, inside that building, which may God annihilate before it is put to such sacrilegious use, the corn of Bideskút will all be ground into flour, and never hand of man touch it!"

There was dead silence for a few moments; even the gipsies ceased to play: they were staring, horror-struck, at the wise bearer of these extraordinary tidings.

"Then, maybe, Jankó also told you to what use the monstrous chimney would be put?" hazarded a timid voice at last.

"Jankó must be a liar," decided the village oracle, sententiously, "or else a fool. What do you think he said about that chimney?"

No one could conjecture; they all shook their heads sadly, filled with awe. Berczi waited, as a true orator should, preparing for a great effect, then he leaned forward on the rough, wooden table and signed to those around to come nearer. There were certain things which could only be mentioned in whispers.

"Jankó declares that the huge fire, for which that monstrously tall chimney has been built, is required in order to set a certain machine—he called it—in motion, which is to grind the corn into flour. Jankó is a liar!" he repeated, but this time with less emphasis and with an anxious look around, altogether unworthy of the wisest man in Árokszállás. But all

8 A Son of the People

cheeks had become very pale, and no one dared to formulate the thoughts, which were running riot in the stolid, superstitious peasant minds.

"I don't like it at all," said a young herdsman at last, as, with a trembling hand, he raised a jug of wine to his lips.

"Who but the devil can find use for a fire big enough to fill that tall chimney with smoke?"

"Evil will come, sooner or later, my children!" concluded the village oracle, solemnly.

"And, in the meanwhile," said a swarthy giant, with great, brown elbows resting on the table, "it is a fact that, while the work in the fields is to be done by Satan and his agency, our lads are to remain idle and take to drink for want of honest toil?"

"It looks uncommonly like it."

"And what is to become of us? Who will pay us wage? How are we going to live?"

"How, indeed!"

"The lord of Bideskút has made a compact with the devil," thundered the giant. "How do we know, that when our bodies are starved to death, he has not arranged to deliver up our souls to his friend Satan?"

Hastily the young men crossed themselves, and their eyes, dark and full of terror, wandered superstitiously round. The quiet little village street lay peaceful and calm in the gathering shades of evening. Behind them, through the open door of the inn, could be heard the voice of the busy hostess, singing some quaint and sweet ditty, as she busied herself with tidying up the parlour and kitchen, after the day's work. Overhead the cool, grey-green weeping willow softly sighed in the gentle summer breeze. Nothing surely to disturb the happy quietude of these simple peasant minds, and yet,

superstitious terror seemed to lurk in every corner, and the eyes of none dared wander beyond the village towards the horizon, where, on ahead, a large building with its tall chimney could still be seen dimly outlined in the west.

"I am for asking Pater Ambrosius to say a special Mass to keep the devil away," suggested a young herdsman at last.

"The Pater promised me he would bless plenty of holy water next Sunday; we shall want it in our homes," said Vas Berczi, with a feeble attempt at consolation.

"There is nothing the devil hates like holy water, I am told," whispered the giant.

"We might ask Pater Ambrosius to sprinkle the entire building with holy water," suggested one of the men.

"Would it not be better if the Pater blessed the next rainfall, so that it should rain holy water down that chimney and put out the fire the devil has lighted?"

"There was no rain last St. Swithin's day," said Berczi, who was of a decidedly pessimistic turn of mind; "we shall get none for at least another ten days."

"Time enough for the devil to settle down in the village, and then, not the Archbishop, not the Pope in Rome, himself, can drive him out again."

"I say, we are all a set of cowards," said the swarthy giant, suddenly jumping to his feet and pointing a huge, muscular fist towards the west. "We have allowed my lord to enter into compact with the devil, we have stood idly by, while brick upon brick was piled up to construct a palace for Satan. Now, we are told that on the day after to-morrow, all the devils in hell will be at work in that mill of Lucifer, that, on the day

after to-morrow, the beautiful corn of Bideskút will be ground into flour, through no other help but that of a huge fire and a monstrous chimney, and some contrivance made of iron which I could not forge on my anvil, though I have done some pretty tough smith's work in my day: and do you mean to tell me, mates, that we are going to stand by and look on while the bread is being taken out of our mouths and our souls delivered over to the enemy of man?"

"No, no!—Well spoken, Sándor the smith!—We will not stand it!" was the universal chorus of approbation, whilst Berczi, who did not approve of any one's talk save his own, shrugged his shoulders in contempt. "We should be cowards if we put up with it."

The giant's peroration had helped to rouse the sinking spirits. There was a general cry to the gipsies to strike up, and the *czigány* (gipsy), seeing the more lively temper of the company, attacked with renewed vigour an inspiring Magyar tune.

"Here, Lotti! more wine! quick!" shouted one or two of the older men, while the others filled fresh pipes preparatory to listening more attentively to Sándor the smith's vigorous diction.

After a few minutes, out came the pretty hostess, with two or three bottles and jugs in her plump hands, and showing a row of snow-white teeth in a merry smile.

She was wonderfully agile in avoiding the venture-some arms stretched out to catch her slim waist, and as soon as she had put jugs and bottles down, she administered one or two vigorous corrections on the cheeks of the more foolhardy of her admirers.

"What are you all making such a noise about all of a sudden?" she said, with a toss of her tiny dark

head. "I thought you were up to some mischief, you were so quiet just now!"

"Great things are happening, Lotti, my soul," said the smith, with the importance befitting his newly-found popularity. "We have important things to discuss which are not fit for women's ears to hear."

Lotti looked at him while fun sparkled out of her bright, dark eyes; she shrugged her plump shoulders and said with a merry laugh:

"Dear me! dear me, Sándor! how big we talk, now that Kemény András¹ does not happen to be here. I know what you are all concocting though I pretend I do not hear. You know András won't allow you to say disrespectful things about my lord, or to brew mischief against him, and so you wait till you know he is well out of sight, and hatch all sorts of wickedness behind his back. But, I tell you, he is not so far as you all think. He will catch you at your tricks never fear, and then—you know he has a devil of a temper all his own!"

"And I have a devil of a temper too, my pretty Lotti," retorted the giant laughing, "and you are very venturesome to have roused the anger of Sándor the smith. Do you think we are so many children, afraid of András as of a schoolmaster? You shall kiss me for that piece of impudence, Lotti; ay! you shall kiss me three times, which will make your lord and master so jealous that he will break his new stick across your plump shoulders. And then, who will be frightened? Eh, my pretty one?"

And with true Hungarian light-heartedness, the swarthy giant, forgetting the devil and his works, the

¹In Hungarian the surname always precedes the Christian name.

lord of Bideskút and his steam-mills, proceeded with a merry laugh to chase the pretty woman round the table; while the young herdsmen, delighted with the scene—which was much more in accordance with their lazy, sunny dispositions than talks of devil or plots against my lord—took part, some for the smith, some for Lotti, by placing an obstructive arm either in her way or in that of her pursuer, while the bronzed musicians played a merry *csárdás*,¹ and the village echoed with gaiety and noise.

¹ The national Hungarian dance.

CHAPTER II

A POPULAR FAVOURITE

HOT, panting, and excited, the pretty hostess ran round and round the table under the willow tree, closely pressed by Sándor the smith, who, however, had previously drunk a little too much of the good wine for which the county of Heves is famous, to be steady enough on his legs for a successful pursuit.

She had paused on one side of the table, holding both her hands against her heart, which was beating very hard, with the madcap race and the laughter. Sándor the smith had paused on the opposite side, both antagonists eyeing one another ready for a spring; the young peasants were laying wagers for or against the combatants, and encouraging both to resume the fight, when suddenly — without any warning — two strong arms closed round pretty Lotti's waist, from behind, and two loud kisses were imprinted on both her dimpled cheeks, while a laughing voice shouted across to the giant:

"You went to work the wrong way, my friend Sándor. This is the way to do it, is it not, Lotti?"

And while she struggled, the new-comer succeeded in stealing one or two more kisses from the pretty woman, then he lifted her bodily off her feet, and carried her to her own door, and having placed her in safety within the parlour he shut the door, and turned

with a merry laugh towards the smith, who had borne his discomfiture with a good-humoured growl.

"Have a bottle of wine with me, Sándor, to compensate you for that lost kiss. Lotti, my pigeon," he shouted, rapping at the door, "as soon as your little heart has ceased to beat quite so fast, bring out some more wine, enough to go round. And you, *czigány*, let us have the liveliest tune you can play, while we all drink to good fellowship, to pretty women, and to our beloved Magyar country, which may God bless and protect!"

There was no resisting the young peasant's cheerful voice and contagious laugh. Very soon Lotti reappeared, pouting but tidy, with half a dozen fresh bottles which she placed on the table, taking care to give her burly antagonist a wide berth.

"Are you so very angry with Sándor, Lotti?" asked the new-comer, with a smile; "why, he only wanted to kiss you, and surely you have allowed him to do that, before now, without so much fuss."

She shrugged her shoulders and said with quite a touch of malice in her voice:

"Ask him, András, why it was we quarrelled; why he wanted to kiss me, and why I would not let him; and see if he will tell you."

Then she ran back to the house, but before finally closing the door, she turned again and added:

"It was because they were talking a lot of nonsense about my lord and the mill, and I would not let them, for I knew they would not have done it if you had been there."

And with this parting shot the triumphant little person slammed the door of her parlour to, and very soon her high-pitched voice was heard

singing an accompaniment to the gipsies' primitive instruments.

Outside, beneath the overhanging willow tree, there had been silence after the young hostess's malicious little speech. The young herdsmen and peasants, like so many chidden children, had left their wine untasted and were staring before them, silent and shamefaced, while the burly giant, and even Berczi the oracle, smoked away at their pipes, while stealing furtive glances at the new-comer.

"Well! and what is it all about?" asked the latter, looking round at the men with a good-natured smile.

There was no reply.

"That infernal steam-mill again, I suppose?" he added with a sigh.

Again there was no reply, but presently there came a grunt from old Berczi:

"Did you know that it was going to be started on its godless work on the day after to-morrow, András?" he asked.

András nodded.

"And I suppose that from the day after to-morrow we can all lie down and starve, for there will be no more work for honest hands to do, when Satan turns on his fire and his smoke, and sows, reaps, binds, and grinds God's corn on God's earth," added the village oracle.

"And what I was saying when that little cat interrupted me," said Sándor the smith, "was that ——"

But very quietly András's rough brown hand was placed on the giant's arm, and his cheery voice interrupted calmly:

"What you were saying, Sándor, and what all the others agreed with at once, because they knew it was

quite true, was that it did not matter what the devil and my lord did over there at Bideskút, for there was always Kemény András at Kisfalu, who would find work for all willing hands, and whose purse is long enough to prevent any one for leagues around to want for anything, let alone to starve !”

Again there was dead silence, while the look of shame deepened on the faces of all. The gipsies were playing a tender, appealing tune, a Hungarian folk-song that would soften the heart of any hearer.

“You are a good sort, András,” said the village oracle, while Sándor the smith drank a mugful of wine to get rid of an uncomfortable lump in his throat, “but ——”

“There is no ‘but,’ my mates. We must stand by one another, and, believe me, that is all nonsense about the devil turning the machinery. I can’t explain it all to you, but Pater Ambrosius has promised me this evening, that to-morrow, instead of a sermon, he will make it quite clear to you, what it is that will grind the corn in my lord’s new mill. Then you will understand all about it, just as I think I understand it, and, till then, I want you all to try and forget that accursed mill, or at any rate not to brood over it. It is getting late and I have a long ride home, but will you all promise me that, until to-morrow after Mass you will try not to think about the mill? And this is to all of you and your very good healths,” he added, raising his mug of wine. “Have I your promise?”

“We promise !”

The answer was unanimous. Evidently the rich young peasant was popular; his words had carried weight. The mugs of wine were emptied, and a sigh of relief and satisfaction escaped the lips of all. The

gipsies started a livelier tune, as András uttered a soft call:

“Csillag, my beauty, where are you?”

There was the sound of hoofs on the dry, sandy earth, and a lovely black mare, sleek and graceful, emerged from out the darkness, and coming quite close to the table where the peasants were drinking, found her way to her master's side, and there waited quietly for him. She carried neither saddle, stirrup, nor bridle, but the peasants on the Hungarian *pusztas* need no such accessories. Their horses seem almost a part of themselves, as they ride at breakneck speed across the sandy plains.

In a moment, András was astride across his mare, and with a shout of “Farewell!” to his friends, a responsive “*Eljen!*” (Long live!) from them, he had galloped away into the darkness.

CHAPTER III

PRIDE OF RACE

ALL was astir in the castle, in the stables, the farm-yard, the park and garden of Bideskút. The innumerable grooms, coachmen, cooks, and maids rushed hither and thither, like so many chickens let loose, busy, each with his or her own work, hot, panting, and excited. The Countess, herself, accustomed as she was to the boundless hospitality of a Hungarian nobleman, could not quite shake off the electrical wave of excitement which pervaded the whole house. The festivals in honour of her birthday, coupled with those for the opening of the new steam-mill, were in full preparation. To-day, still, the big house was fairly free from guests; but to-morrow, probably, the stream of arrivals would commence, and would continue throughout the day.

As to the numbers of the invaders it was wholly problematical: it was generally known throughout the county that the 28th of August was Countess Irma's birthday, that Bideskút itself had some sixty guest chambers, and that any Hungarian noble, far or near, with all his family, was sure, during the few days' gaiety by which the occasion was annually celebrated, to find the warmest welcome, the most lavish hospitality, the richest and choicest of wines, in the time-honoured traditions of the Hungarian lowland.

Therefore Bideskúty Gyuri,¹ and the Countess Irma, his wife, were at this season of the year always prepared to receive a number of guests; oxen, sheep, and lambs were indiscriminately slaughtered, also geese, ducks, poultry of every kind; the whitest of bread baked, the oldest casks of wine tapped, the finest cloths, sheets, and napkins aired, all ready for the probable hundred guests, their children, their coachmen and valets, their couriers, and their maids.

In one of the old-fashioned, lofty rooms of the ancestral home of Bideskút, the lord thereof and his aristocratic wife sat discussing the final arrangements for the entertainment of all the expected and unexpected guests. Fine old oak and mahogany chairs and tables, turned and carved by the skilful hands of a village carpenter, furnished the room, whilst curtains of thick unbleached linen, embroidered in exquisite designs of many colours, hung before the small leaded windows, and tempered the glare of the midday sun.

Bideskúty Gyuri, jovial and good-tempered, was smoking his favourite pipe, while Countess Irma was telling off, on her slender fingers, the row of guests she was expecting on the morrow:

"The Egregyis are sure to come," she said, meditatively, "the Kantássys, the Vécserys, the Palotays, the Arany, the Miskolczys, and the Bartócz: these are all quite certain. You cannot reckon less than four servants to each, and with their children and any friends they may bring with them, will make no less than seventy that we are quite sure of. Then another forty or fifty always come, beyond those one expects. You remember last year we sat down one hundred and seventy to dinner."

¹ In Hungarian the surname precedes the Christian name.

"Well, my dear," rejoined my lord, "you give what orders you like, and kill whatever you wish eaten. Thank God there is plenty of food in Bideskút to feed every friend and his family for as long as they choose to take a bite with us. If there is not enough room to give them each a separate bed, then we can lay straw all round the riding school, and the younger men can sleep there, and leave the good rooms for the ladies and children. Kill, my dear, by all means; let Panna slaughter what poultry she will, pull up what cabbages and carrots she wants, there is plenty and to spare!"

And Bideskúty, proud and secure in his fat lands, which yielded him all that could enable him to exercise the lavish hospitality for which his country is famous, leaned back in his arm-chair, and puffed away contentedly at his long cherry-wood pipe.

"I wish I could have got Ilonka a new silk dress for the occasion," said Countess Irma, a little wistfully.

"My dear," laughed her lord, jovially, "Ilonka will look bewitching in that bit of muslin I bought from the Jew for her for a couple of florins, and you know quite well that greasy bank-notes and other portraits of our well-beloved majesty, Francis Joseph, are very scarce in this land of ours. And I say thank God for that! We never want for anything we cannot have. Why," he added with a pleasurable chuckle, "if it were not for my mill and my machinery I should never wish to see a bank-note from year's end to year's end."

"And yet you will go on spending it on that accursed steam-mill and those reaping machines, which the peasants fear and hate, and I must say I do not blame them for that. God never had anything to do with

those things. They are the devil's own invention, Gyuri, and I cannot help dreading that some trouble will come of it all."

"Why! you talk like some of those superstitious peasants themselves. You women cannot understand the enormous boon and profit it will be to me and to my land, when my steam-mill is regularly at work."

"The profit may or may not come by and by; I dare say I do not understand these things, but I do see that you cannot possibly go on spending money with both hands on those inventions of Satan."

Bideskúty did not reply. He had found by long experience that it was always best to oppose silence to his wife's voluble talk whenever the subject of his favourite and costly fad cropped up between them.

"Gyuri," resumed Countess Irma, "it is not too late. Will you give up this folly, and not mar the jolly times we always have on my birthday, by starting that mill on its ungodly work?"

"My dear," replied her lord, driven out of his stronghold of silence by this direct question, "you are supposed to be an intelligent woman; therefore, you do not imagine that I have spent close upon a million florins in building a mill, and do not mean to see it at work now that it is finished?"

"You have only gone on with the thing from a feeling of obstinacy, Gyuri; it is not too late to give in. There is not a soul who has not dissuaded you from continuing these terrible new-fangled notions, which have already made you hideously unpopular on your own estate."

Once more her lord had entrenched himself behind a barrier of impenetrable silence. Dreamily he went on smoking his long-stemmed cherry-wood pipe, and

allowed the flood of his wife's eloquence to spend itself over his unresisting head.

"Gyuri," continued the Countess, "I have noticed that you have received lately a great many visits from the Jews. When we were first married, never one of them darkened our doors. You know I hate all your machinery fads, so you tell me nothing of what you are doing with them, but no Jew would come here, unless there was something to buy or sell, or money to lend at usury. You will indeed bring shame upon us, if you begin to sell your lands, your corn, or your wine, just like any Jew tradesman. There is plenty and to spare, I know, you have said it yourself, but the corn does not grow upon a Hungarian nobleman's estate that he should dirty his fingers by taking money for it."

"My dear," suggested the lord of Bideskút mildly, "when I took over this property, after my father's death, I found over thirty thousand measures of wheat rotting away, without the slightest use being made of it."

"Well!" she said, "why not? why should it not rot? If there is too much of it, even to give away? In my father's house in one year three thousand measures of wheat went bad, and he would have allowed fifty thousand to go the same way sooner than sell it. Take money for it? . . . Horrible!" she added, with all the pride of her long line of ancestry.

Again her husband did not reply; perhaps he thought of the fact that neither his wife nor any of her sisters would probably have had a roof over their heads at this moment if they had not been married; for not only the corn, but the fields, the beasts, the farms, and even the ancestral home had long since passed into the

hands of the Jews; their father had not sullied his fingers by trafficking with his corn and timber, but had mortgaged his land, his house, his all, up to the hilt, and left his children proud as Lucifer, but without a groat apiece.

The Countess Irma was still a very handsome woman, in spite of her forty-odd years. Her figure was shapely, her skin still fresh, her hair as black as the raven's wing. She had been a great beauty in her day, and had been the acknowledged belle of the two carnivals she spent at Budapesth. Her mother had brought her up in the firmly-rooted principle that it is the duty of every Hungarian aristocratic girl to be beautiful, and to make a good marriage, and the young Countess Irma, when she reached the age of eighteen, was quite ready to do both. The first year of her going out she picked and chose carefully amongst her adorers, for she had many. High lineage and vast estates were an absolute *sine qua non* before any partner dared even to ask her to dance the cotillon. "Humanity begins with the Barons," was her much-repeated statement, which virtually choked off any aspirant to her hand who was not thus elevated in the human scale. But alas! the first year went by, and Countess Irma had not found the proper *parti* that would suit her own and her mother's pride, and the following year it was vaguely whispered in the aristocratic club of Budapesth that she had not been heard to make her sweeping statement on the subject of humanity once during the carnival.

The next carnival came and went, and Countess Irma, to her horror, noted that at two balls of the season she was obliged to have a headache before the cotillon, for she had not secured a partner. Things

were beginning to look absolutely tragic when suddenly Bideskúty Gyuri appeared upon the scene. He was young, good-looking, owned half the county of Heves, and professed to be violently in love with the somewhat faded beauty; true, he was not a Baron, and therefore a couple of years ago might have been ranked on a level with the Countess's lapdog and pet canary; but since then much water had flowed down the Danube and the world was becoming more radical throughout. Bideskúty paid his court, was duly accepted, and the Countess Irma was heard, at the great Casino ball, to remark that humanity embraced every Hungarian noble who owned half of any county.

They had led a very comfortable married life together, Gyuri being always willing to give way to his wife in all matters; fortunately her tastes were very similar to his in all but one respect; like him, she loved the almost regal life of a Hungarian nobleman upon his estates, and, like him, once married, she cared nothing for Budapesth, where money was necessary, of which they had very little, and where she would perforce have to eat the meat of other people's oxen and calves, and vegetables grown in some alien garden; like him, she was absolutely indifferent as to the political aspect of the country; she loved it because it was her own country and therefore must be better than anybody else's, and because better corn and wine grew there, fatter beasts were fed there, than in any other country in the world; but, as to the changes of ministry up there in Budapesth, as to parliaments, elections, union with Austria, or complete severance, neither she nor her lord cared anything about that; so long as her daughter Ilonka, in her turn, made a suitable marriage, and her husband did not get into the

Jews' hands through his unfortunate fondness for agricultural improvements, she would just as soon have seen Hungary in the hands of Russians, Hottentots, or even Germans. Serenely she would have sailed through life, satisfied that all was for the best in this best possible world, if alas ! the crumpled roseleaf had not troubled her, in the shape of her husband's unfortunate craze for machinery, which reeked of "bourgeoisism," and was altogether unworthy of a Hungarian nobleman, whose duty it was to eat and drink, to live in a lordly manner, to entertain his friends, and to leave all other matters to people who had no ancestors, and formed therefore no integral part of humanity.

CHAPTER IV

THE MONEY-LENDER

"ROSENSTEIN the Jew is downstairs, my lord," announced Jankó, Bideskúty's valet, respectfully opening the door; "he says your lordship has bid him come this morning."

Countess Irma made no comment; before a servant, even the most trusted, she never gainsaid or argued with the head of the house, but invariably set the example herself of complete respect and deference. Nothing could be gained now by commenting on the arrival of Rosenstein, whose shuffling steps she could already hear in the passage.

"Well! my dear," said Bideskúty, a little nervously, "perhaps you had better have another interview with Panna, while I speak with Rosenstein, and, remember, you have my permission to kill everything on the farm you want, and to order whatever you like, so long as you see that there is plenty to eat, and we bring no shame on the hospitality of Bideskút. Tell the Jew to come in," he added, turning to his valet, "and mind he wipes his dirty shoes before he walks across the hall."

The next moment the Jew, with doubled spine and obsequious bow, entered humbly into the room. As the Countess sailed majestically past him, he tried to stoop still lower, and to kiss the hem of her gown, but gathering her skirts closely round her, and without

vouchsafing him the merest look, she left her husband alone with him.

Rosenstein's age could not be easily guessed at, not even approximately; his scanty hair, of a dull carrotty colour, hung from beneath a faded skull-cap, in two locks on each side of his face. His long gaberdine, buttoned all the way down the front, hung loosely on his spare frame, and was worn almost threadbare on the sharp, protruding blades of his shoulders. He rubbed his thin, claw-like hands incessantly together, and his watery blue eyes were fixed on the floor, all the time the noble lord deigned to converse with him. Only from time to time, when he thought himself unobserved, he threw a sharp, malignant look at the Hungarian, then his thin lips almost disappeared between his teeth, and there was that in his colourless eyes which would have taught a shrewd man to beware.

"Have you brought me the money?" asked Bideskúty, peremptorily.

"Well, you see, my lord, it is this way: your lordship knows that I am a poor man, and cannot possibly find so great a sum myself, and——"

"I know the usual lie," interrupted Bideskúty, laughing. "Never mind telling me about the obliging friend who is willing to come to the rescue, at the cost of exorbitant interest, for which you will have to promise my best bit of land as security. Tell me quickly if you will take Zárda as security for the two hundred and fifty thousand florins, and what interest you will want for it?"

"Zárda is very poor security, noble lord, for a quarter of a million. There is no house, and——"

"Hey! the devil take these Jews," thundered Bideskúty, "they have lived in mud huts all their lives,

their ancestors were vermin in the gutter, and now they want a house to live in. Zárda will never get into your dirty hands, never fear; I will redeem it, and all my lands, as soon as my mill is at work, and my flour becomes famed throughout the country."

"Your lordship speaks words of wisdom," said the wily Jew, throwing surreptitiously a sarcastic glance at Bideskúty, "the steam-mill is a grand speculation, for it will lessen labour, and therefore improve the condition of your peasantry. That is the reason why my friends are not averse to letting me have the money, which I am most desirous of lending to your lordship for so noble a purpose on the not very good security of Zárda."

"Hold your confounded tongue about Zárda; it will be ample honour for you in exchange for your cursed money, if ever your dirty foot even treads its soil. What about the interest?"

Rosenstein had bitten his lips hard while Bideskúty poured out this flood of abusive language. He and his race, patient, tenacious, thick-skinned, are used to this accompaniment to the ever-increasing monetary transactions they have with the extravagant, proud Hungarian nobility. They take it as part of the contract, and charge interest accordingly.

"Oh, my lord," he said mildly, "I was forced to accept my friends' conditions as regards the interest; I am a poor man myself, and after I have paid them but little will remain for me on which to live: fortunately I have simple tastes, and one hundred measures of wheat out of the fifty thousand they will require a year will be quite enough for me."

"Fifty thousand measures of wheat? You scoundrel! you——"

"It is not I, noble lord, I protest, it is my friends: they say the price of wheat will be lower than ever this year; that is why the hundred head of cattle, in addition——"

"A hundred head of cattle, besides? You low dog, villainous usurer——"

"Of which I shall only get one ox and one calf for myself, my lord; and how is a poor man to live? My friends will not let me have the money without they have ninety-eight head of cattle, and the wheat, not to speak of the five hundred head of sheep, and the eight hundred poultry, of which they will only allow me twenty-five for myself for arranging this very difficult matter for them."

"You infernal scoundrel, if you do not hold your tongue I will call Jankó in to give you such a beating as you never had in your life. Ten thousand measures of wheat, forty oxen, twenty calves, three hundred sheep, and five hundred poultry I will give you, but not a grain of corn, or tail of lamb beyond."

The Jew's eyes twinkled beneath their thin purple lids, but he kept them steadily fixed on the floor, as he shook his head doubtfully and said:

"I have spoken to my friends very clearly on the subject, I have told your lordship their final word as to the interest; they will not go back on it."

"And I tell you, man, that I will not pay such usury, and if you dare stand there, and demand it, I will have you beaten by the servants."

"Then, I much regret, my lord," said Rosenstein, humbly, "that we shall not be doing business to-day."

"But, you cursed, dirty Jew, may the devil get into that wooden head of thine! I tell you I must have that money at once. The wages of the Budapesth

engineers and workpeople are in arrears, and I still owe part of the money for the machinery, the devil take it!"

"If your lordship wishes, I will speak to my friends again, but I have little hope that they will give in about the interest."

"For God's sake, stop those lies! you know I do not believe in them; I will give you ten thousand measures of wheat——"

"Fifty thousand, my lord——"

"Twenty, I say. Sixty head of cattle——"

"One hundred, my lord——"

"Eighty; and may the devil give them the plague as soon as your dirty hands have touched them. Four hundred sheep——"

"Five hundred——"

"I said twenty thousand measures of wheat, eighty head of cattle, four hundred sheep, and five hundred fowls; and may I join you and your lot down in hell if I give you anything else."

"And, most noble lord, I must assure you that unless my friends get fifty thousand measures of wheat, one hundred head of cattle, five hundred sheep, and eight hundred fowls, they will not advance the money."

This was decidedly exasperating. Bideskúty was badly in want of the money, and the cursed Jew was obstinate; it looked very much as if the nobleman would have to give way to the usurer. A disgraceful thing, surely, absolutely unheard of in past generations, when these wretches were only too happy to lend their money to the noble Barons who required it.

"Look here, you scoundrel," decided Bideskúty at last, "I have told you my final word with regard to that interest. Take what I offered and go in peace.

But if you persist in demanding your usurious percentage, since I must have the money, I will pay it, but then I will hand you over to the lacqueys for a sound beating before you leave this house. Now choose which you will have, will you take twenty thousand measures of wheat, eighty head of cattle, four hundred sheep, and five hundred fowl, or not?"

"I will take fifty thousand measures of wheat, your lordship," repeated the Jew quietly, "one hundred head of cattle, five hundred sheep, and eight hundred fowls—"

"With the beating, then?"

The Jew paused a while, and looked up one instant at the aristocratic figure before him. Tall and powerful, with proud-looking eyes and noble bearing, Bideskúty stood as the very personification of the race which for centuries had buffeted, tormented, oppressed the Jews, denying them every human right, treating them worse than any dog or gipsy. Was the worm turning at the latter half of the nineteenth century? Would the oppressed, armed with their patiently amassed wealth, turn on the squandering, improvident oppressor, secure in the gold, which very soon would rule even this fair Arcadia, the Hungarian lowlands?

Dreamily the Jew rubbed the threadbare patch across his shoulders, which plainly testified that he was not new to these encounters with irate noblemen and their lacqueys; then he assented quietly:

"With the beating, most noble lord."

Bideskúty laughed heartily. All his wrath had vanished. Since he could have the treat of seeing the Jew well flogged, he thought he had not paid too high a price for his pleasure. Rosenstein unbuttoned his threadbare garment, and taking out two large sheets

of paper from an inner pocket, spread them out upon the table.

"What the devil is that?" asked Bideskúty.

"Will your honour be so kind as to sign? It is merely an acknowledgment of the debt, and a guarantee that the interest will be paid."

Bideskúty had become purple with rage.

"You confounded dog, and is not the word of a Hungarian nobleman enough? What can your greasy bits of paper compel me to do, if my own word of honour does not bind me to it?"

"You see, my lord," said the Jew, with the requisite amount of softness that turneth away wrath, "it is not for myself. My friends will require some guarantee from me. They are not used to dealing with honourable lords like yourself."

The Jew had said this with a slightly sarcastic intonation, whilst his mild blue eyes rested maliciously on Bideskúty, who, however, noted neither the tone nor the look.

"You shall be made to eat a piece of pork for this confounded impudence," he said, as he pulled savagely the papers towards him.

He did not take the trouble to read over the documents; such a proceeding, as suggesting knowledge of business matters, would have been wholly unworthy of so noble a descendant of the Bideskútys who helped to place King Mátyás on the throne. In large, somewhat shaky schoolboy hand, he traced his name at the bottom of both the pages without further protest. He had caught sight of a well-filled, very greasy pocket-book, which bulged out of Rosenstein's pocket.

"Now for the money," he said, throwing down the pen, "and after that for the pleasure of seeing my men

give you the soundest hiding you ever had in your life."

The Jew read both documents over carefully, threw the sifted sand over the august signature, then deliberately folded them up and placed them in his pocket. Bideskúty was getting impatient, jerkily he puffed away at his cherry-wood pipe, whilst his eyes travelled longingly towards the panoply of sticks and riding-whips which adorned his wall. Evidently he thought that they would lose nothing by waiting, for he did not speak, till one by one Rosenstein counted out two hundred and fifty notes of one thousand florins each, which passed from his own greasy fingers into the noble lord's aristocratic palms.

"At any time," added the Jew, "that your lordship will require my services, I shall be most pleased to intercede with my rich friends, who, I feel sure, will, on my recommendation, always oblige your lordship."

But the lord of Bideskút was not listening; he had thrust the bank-notes into his pocket, and, opening the door, shouted loudly for Jankó.

"Take this cursed Jew," he said jovially, "down to the kitchen, and see if he will sooner eat a bit of pork, or take a hiding from some of you. Stay!" he added, seeing that Jankó, a sturdy peasant, had already seized the Jew by the collar, "I want to see the fun. Come along, old chap, you know you made your choice; perhaps you will find that extra bit of interest well worth half an hour's trouble. And if they happen to kill you, the whole of your tribe can share between them the fifty thousand measures of wheat, and the rest of the confounded stuff. Now then, Jankó, you can try that new riding-whip of yours on him. Come along, I am in a hurry!"

Rosenstein had become livid. Perhaps at heart he never quite believed that Bideskúty meant to put his threat in execution, but now there seemed no doubt about it, for Jankó, with a vigorous kick directed against his lean shanks, had already persuaded him to follow his tormentor down-stairs.

Noisy talk and boisterous laughter proceeded from the kitchen, where a number of cooks in white caps and aprons, assisted by an army of kitchen-maids and scullions, were busy preparing meat, bread, cakes, and what not for the coming festivities. Silence fell all round as the master entered, laughing joyously and followed by sturdy Jankó pushing the thin, trembling figure of the Jew before him.

"Here! Panna! Mariska! Zsuzsi! all of you. Bring a chair and table here, for I have brought you a guest, an honoured guest, whom you must treat with respect. You must give him the choicest piece off that pig we killed yesterday. Ha! ha!" he chuckled, looking round at Rosenstein, who, helpless under Jankó's grip, was looking savagely round him, like a fox caught in a trap, and throwing deadly looks of hatred at the noble lord before him. The merry peasant girls had caught the spirit of the fun; Panna, Zsuzsi, Mariska, the bright-eyed village beauties, had already bustled round the big centre table. They had spread a clean white cloth, brought out plate, knife, and fork, and set a chair before it.

With much laughter and cries of delight, two powerful peasant lads had lifted the struggling Jew off his feet and seated him forcibly in the chair, while they wound some rope round him and secured him firmly to his seat. This was rare fun; Bideskúty, astride on a chair, was giving laughing directions to his servants,

while the girls from every part of the house came running in, their bright-coloured petticoats swinging round their shapely limbs, their arms bare, their faces aglow with excitement, and stood in the doorways, convulsed with delight at seeing a Jew made to eat a bit of pork. Suddenly a great ripple of laughter greeted the arrival of Benko, the portly chief cook, in snow-white jacket, trousers, and cap, with an immense apron across his burly front, and carrying high up in triumph, a gigantic leg of pork, roasted to a turn, the crackling still spluttering, brown and delicious-looking.

"That 's splendid," said Bideskúty, whilst the girls clapped their hands with delight, and Jankó officiously took a large napkin and tied it under the Jew's chin. He could scarcely do it for very laughter, tears were streaming down his cheeks, and he had to stop every now and then in order to hold his aching sides.

"Now then, old fellow, I 'll warrant you have never had so good a feast in all your life."

Rosenstein certainly did not look as if he enjoyed the fun, which made it all the more amusing. His face was absolutely ghastly, his eyes rolled round and round, more in rage than in fear. He could not move, for he was tightly pinioned to the chair, and each of his hands, which had been made to grip a knife and fork, was firmly held by the steel-like grasp of a young herdsman. But the looks which he threw at his chief tormentor were so full of deadly hatred that perhaps had the noble lord stopped to note them, he would have paused, awed at the infinite depths of human passion that lay behind those mild, colourless, watery eyes.

In the meanwhile Benko had carved two magnificent slices of meat, and with much laughter, the two men were gradually forcing the Jew to put one piece after

another into his mouth. He tried to struggle, but in vain; his tormentors had a very tight hold of him, and when he made futile efforts not to swallow the morsels forbidden by the laws of his race, they held his mouth and nose in a tight grip, so that he was forced to swallow, lest he should choke.

There never had been such laughter in the kitchen of Bideskút; merry peals rang right through the house, so that the Countess and Mademoiselle Ilonka sent to know what the fun was. All the servants had crowded in, and for a quarter of an hour all the coming festivities were forgotten, the bread left in the oven, the huge roast on the spits, in the joy of seeing a Jew swallow two slices of pork. Rosenstein, after the first few struggles for liberty, had resigned himself to his fate, further persuaded into submission by the ominous cracking of the herdsmen's whips in the scullery beyond. Bideskút had laughed till he cried. Certainly he had ceased to regret those last measures of corn, and extra head of cattle and sheep, which were to pay the exorbitant interest on the Jew's money, since they had procured him the best fun he had had for many a day.

At last it was decided that the Jew had eaten as much as he conveniently could; moreover, there really was no time for any more merriment that day, if full justice was to be done to the plenteous hospitality of Bideskút. The noble lord gave the signal, and the Jew was released from his bonds; trembling with rage, he tried to make his way out of the kitchen, through the laughing groups of pretty maids, who, with mock gravity, dropped him ironical curtsies, to speed the parting guest.

Bideskút evidently thought that the Jew had paid sufficiently for his outrageous demands, for Rosenstein

was spared the promised beating; one or two cracks across his lean shanks, from the long whips of the young herdsmen, was all he had to endure. He did not stop to rub the sore places, nor did he cast another look at his tormentors. With all the speed his shuffling feet would allow, he hurried out of the lordly abode of his debtor; his lips tightly compressed, his fingers nervously clutched together, he crossed the hall, the park, and the acacia plantation. Outside the gates he stopped, and, like Lot's wife, he looked back.

The château of Bideskút, the ancestral home of the Bideskútys ever since they had helped Hunyady Mátyás to the throne, was in itself not a very imposing building, except perhaps owing to its vastness: a low, regular, two-storied construction, built in a quadrangle round a courtyard in the middle. The stone had been plastered and painted over a bright yellow, after the fashion of the beginning of the century, and a double row of green shutters ran like two bright-coloured belts all round the house. The garden was mostly laid out in quaint, conventional beds of standard rose trees, each surmounted with a gaily-coloured glass ball, that threw pretty patches of brightness against a background of tall, sweet-scented acacias. A wide, circular stone stair led from the lower to the vast upper hall, which occupied a large portion of the main wing, and was *par excellence* the great dining-hall, where two hundred guests could dine without being crowded, at the two huge horse-shoe tables that stood on the tiled floor. Half-way up the stairs, in a niche in the stone wall, a gigantic granite statue of Attila frowned down on those who passed.

The guest-chambers formed two sides of the quadrangle, and opened out under a veranda on to the

courtyard, in the middle of which there was a round garden, bordered with dwarf acacias, and laid out with more beds of standard rose trees and coloured glass balls. The veranda ran round, supported by columns, in the capitals of which swallows had built their nests. The last side of the quadrangle contained the vast kitchen, offices, and rooms for the women and indoor servants; the others—gardeners, grooms, herdsmen, and shepherds—slept under the blue vault of heaven, wrapped in their great sheepskin coats.

For full five minutes Rosenstein the Jew stood at the gates, his thin hands clutching the iron fretwork, his colourless eyes aglow with inward passion, the very personification, the living statue of a deadly, revengeful hatred. For full five minutes he stood there, till he saw a graceful vision in white come wandering down the sweet-scented alley, then he once more turned towards the village and went his way.

CHAPTER V

AN OLD MISER

TURNING his back on the great gates, Rosenstein the Jew walked away towards the plain.

To his right and left, as he walked, the county of Heves, with Bideskút, Kisfalú, and Zárda, stretched out in all its midsummer splendour; as far as the eye could reach, waving fields of golden wheat, the finest the world produces, graceful plumed heads of maize, and the glistening green of watermelons gladdened the eye with their richness and plenty. The Jew's gaze rested contentedly and somewhat sarcastically on all the rich property, and every now and then he rubbed his thin, shrivelled hands together.

The roads, as is usual during the dry season, were lined with deep ruts and fissures, and the Jew's feet became sore with hard and weary walking. But he seemed not to care. Thoughts, which evidently were exceedingly pleasant, helped to soften the hard road for him, and his hand wandered lovingly to the pocket, lately filled to overflowing with bank-notes, now comparatively empty, save for the documents that bore the prodigal lord's signature.

The road along which Rosenstein was walking was bordered on either side for some distance with tall, slender poplars, the silver-lined leaves of which trembled at every breeze; in front, far ahead, could be

dimly discerned the vast sandy plain, with its ruddy arid soil, its deep blue sky overhead, and its quaint tumble-down inn on the wayside.

All was silence and peace around, save for the occasional distant sound of a herd of wild horses, galloping madly across the plain, or overhead the strident cry of the stork calling to its mate; only in the heart of the solitary human wayfarer, in the midst of this vast peaceful immensity, there lurked passions, turbulent and wild, envy, hatred, and malicious triumph.

Rosenstein seemed to feel no fatigue. He had walked for three hours along the dreary road, and had now at last caught sight of the quaint wayside inn, only a kilometre beyond.

The Jew with the diffidence taught to his race by centuries of derision had gradually come near. His narrow, light-coloured eyes peered anxiously round, evidently in search of some one. Loud laughter and mocking comments from the two sturdy young peasants who were sitting, sipping their wine, and smoking their long pipes lazily, greeted his arrival.

Rosenstein ventured a few modest raps on the table, but as no one came in answer, he gathered up sufficient courage to peep in at the door.

"Don't dare to enter my kitchen, you dirty Jew!" said a shrill voice from within.

"No! I would not for worlds, and I would not trouble you at all, only Kemény András from Kisfalú has told me to meet him here."

"Well! he has not come yet, and you cannot wait inside here!"

The interior of the inn looked decidedly cooler than the exterior, for through the thickly thatched roof and walls, mostly wood and mud, the fierceness of the sun

could hardly enter; close to one of the windows, the owner of the shrill voice sat; a buxom figure of a low-land peasant woman, in multi-coloured petticoats, full-sleeved lawn shift, and tight-fitting corselet; she was lazily turning her spinning-wheel with one foot, while her well-shaped fingers deftly spun the fine flax thread. The fire in the huge earthen oven had been allowed to die out, and on it shone the many vessels, pots, and pans, glistening with polish, which had served to cook the mid-day meal.

With a sigh the Jew had turned away from the door and the inviting coolness within, and taken humbly his seat in the very glare of the sun, for the young peasants had disdainfully refused to make way for him at the table under the willow tree. There he sat patiently, not daring to ask for wine or even water, for fear his presumption might entail his banishment from the precincts of the inn altogether, when he would perforce have had to wait on his feet until it was Kemény András's good pleasure to arrive. His ears, however, well-trained to catch every scrap of conversation that was not meant for them to hear, were sharply on the alert. The two young herdsmen lazily smoking their long pipes, and drinking deep draughts of Hungarian wine, were whispering excitedly together. The Jew, while seemingly overcome with fatigue and the heat, his eyes closed, his mouth open, lost not a word of what they said.

The young peasants were discussing the eternal topic of the lord of Bideskút's mysterious buildings and contrivances, that were supposed to do the work they and their fathers before them had done with their own hands.

"I have heard my master say," said the one, "that

it will grind as much corn in one day as would take a month with six windmills at work to do; and that three men with it can do the work of twenty."

"We do not hear much about it in the kitchen," replied the other, "but my mother has learned a good bit from Jankó, my lord's valet; and he says that my lord sits up now till the middle of the night, with one candle and some huge books in front of him, and, although Jankó has learned to read and to write, he could not make head or tail of what was in those books, the letters all seemed mixed up anyhow."

"You may be sure the devil has printed them himself; truly the holy Virgin can have nothing to do with things that in some mysterious way do the work of twenty men. Mark me, evil will come on your lord and his house, sooner or later."

"What can come but evil, of bringing the devil into the village? Jankó told my mother that the big books came from a place called England."

"I once saw a picture," said the other, mysteriously, "of some people, that the Pater over at Árokszállás told me came from England. They looked very like what we do," he added thoughtfully.

"Only they have big teeth, and red hair, like the Jews. England is very far from here."

"Yes, you have to get in a boat, and go across the sea to get there; I have heard my lady say that."

"How can you cross the sea without being drowned?" asked the herdsman who had first spoken.

"I do not know," said the other, shaking his head sadly at the immensity of the problem.

"It would be better if my lord went on the sea and got drowned, rather than make himself one with the

devil, and bring some terrible misfortune on the village, ay, probably on the whole county."

"If any evil comes on the village through these contrivances of Lucifer, we shall have to fight the devil, somehow. We have sisters, mothers, wives; we must protect them from Satan."

Their whisperings had become very low, the Jew tried in vain to catch any more snatches of their conversation, an awed, superstitious look was on both their young faces; their bronzed cheeks were quite pale, and their bright, dark eyes peered anxiously round as if expecting every moment to see the evil one appear from out the wall. Rosenstein caught them both pointing the first and fourth finger at him, while expectorating three times on the ground in his direction, a sure way of keeping Satan at a distance, should he have chosen the disguise of a Jew usurer in which to haunt the county of Heves.

The sun was gradually sinking lower and lower on the horizon. The intense heat had somewhat subsided, and the two young herdsmen, having finished their wine, prepared to depart to rejoin their herds.

They turned into the inn to pay their few groats for the drink, and kiss the buxom landlady, as is always customary when she happens to be young and comely, and her husband not within sight.

Far out on the horizon, a tiny speck had gradually grown larger as it drew nearer, and Rosenstein, with a sigh of contentment, noted that the speck soon assumed the shape of a man on horseback. The two herdsmen as they departed down the road had also looked at the fast approaching speck, and pronounced it to be Kemény András on his black mare; nearer and nearer it drew, and now Rosenstein could easily distinguish

the broad figure and bronzed face of the rich peasant as he rode saddleless and stirrupless at breakneck speed, his white lawn shirt and full trousers fluttering in the breeze, as if they were the wings which helped the swift-footed mare on her wild career.

The pretty landlady came to her door to greet the new guest, for he always had a merry jest for her, ay! and often a bright bit of ribbon, or a shiny locket, which he had bought from some pedlar on the way, and gladdened her heart and her vanity with it.

Kemény András had brought his mare to a standstill, and she stood calm and placid, not having turned a hair during her mad canter, while her master dismounted, and patted her sleek neck, and whispered soft endearing words to her, to which she responded by rubbing her nose against his hand.

The Jew did not dare approach him, until it was András's own good pleasure to notice the humble presence of the descendant of Israel. Truly a fine figure was that typical representative of a prosperous Hungarian peasant. Tall, above the average of his race, with straight, broad shoulders, his face bronzed by the sun, his foot, small and arched, firmly planted on the soil, Kemény András was decidedly good to look at, as every girl in the county of Heves had declared for the past ten years, since it had transpired that old Kemény had proved himself to be the miser which every one had always suspected him to be, and had died, leaving coffers full of gold and bank-notes which made his handsome son nearly as rich as my lord.

The old man—András's father—had been a curious figure among his fellow peasants on this side of the Tarna, in his shabby *bunda* (huge sheepskin mantle), and his coarse linen, and with his sharp features,

tightly compressed lips, and bushy eyebrows, so different from the merry, open countenance of a Hungarian peasant.

It was vaguely whispered, that far back, some hundreds of years ago, the Keménys had had a Jewish ancestress, and it was generally admitted that from that hereditary taint—for taint it was for any peasant to have even a drop of Jew blood in his veins—old Kemény had inherited his love of money, his avarice, his greed of gain.

Be that as it may, his life at Kisfalu—a tumble-down thatched farm he rented from the lord of Bideskút—was known to be of the most parsimonious kind. While he was young, he kept one servant to wash and cook for him, fed himself on pumpkin, milk, and rye bread, slept on the bare boards, and never set foot in either inn or church, where, of necessity, he would have had to leave some kreutzers (farthings) behind.

Gradually, year by year, he added first a field, then another, then bits of vineyard to the farm, while his cattle, horses, pigs, and sheep multiplied exceedingly. But old Kemény never changed his mode of life. He now had to employ a great deal of labour in his fields and vineyards, and for this he paid as wages the few coppers or the measures of wheat that were customary, neither more nor less. He was his own overseer and spared himself neither morning, noon, nor night. His rents he paid in kind, as the lord of Bideskút demanded, but on the surplus he neither fed nor clothed himself as all—peasant or noble—do in the Hungarian lowlands. He neither ate wheaten bread, nor drank good wine, he wore no fine linen, or warm woollen garments; all his produce, animal and vegetable, he sold every year to the Jew traders, and at a high price too, for the lands

round Kisfalu proved fatter and richer than some of Bideskút itself. As to what he did with the money he amassed year after year, no one in Árokszállás, or the other villages round, ever knew. He spoke to no one, never stopped to gossip on Sunday afternoons, or at even, when the work was done. The sowers, reapers, grape-gatherers, and wine-pressers were never allowed within the actual precincts of the farm; what was due to them for their labour, in money or in kind, he gave them, but never a word that would give anybody the least idea of what was going on within that shrewd, thin head of his. As for the Jew Rosenstein, who did all his selling for him, and who was the only and very frequent visitor at the farm, it was of course quite impossible to glean anything in the way of information from him; for even had any of the shepherds or herdsmen so far bemeaned themselves as to gossip with a Jew, old Rosenstein would never have spoken of any financial transaction in which he had a hand.

Late in life old Kemény gave still further food for gossip by marrying, without giving to any one for miles around previous warning of his intention of doing so. He had always been considered, owing to his parsimonious habits and eccentricities, such a confirmed bachelor that the news that he had one day gone to the other side of the Tarna and brought home a bride, took the village by storm. Great hopes were at first entertained of hearing from the new wife all that had been a mystery in old Kemény's life; but either that the inhabitants of the opposite side of the Tarna were also a secretive and parsimonious lot, or that the wife was drilled to obey her husband, certain it is that Kemény Etelka proved as mysterious, as silent as her lord. She went to church every Sunday, true; but she

never stopped outside the porch for a bit of gossip; she never placed a single copper in the plate, and though her husband rented the biggest farm in the county of Heves, she never wore anything but a cotton dress, and always walked to church barefoot. She was a pale, gentle creature, and many noticed that during Mass she very frequently cried.

Two years after their marriage András was born. A fine boy he was from the first, and much admired by all the women, when his mother brought him to church with her. There was absolutely no preventing his being kissed and petted, when he walked so proudly by her side, his little dark head erect, his bright eyes looking proudly round him. His mother had to stop now every Sunday outside the church to hear his praises sung by every woman in the village.

"Ah, the beautiful little angel!"

"A true Magyar!"

"The handsomest boy this side of the Tarna!"

And it was with difficulty the mother succeeded in parrying the indiscreet questions which inevitably followed this overflow of admiration for her boy.

As for old Kemény, it was impossible to kindle a spark of pride in him, by talking to him of his boy.

"Another mouth to feed," he would say dolefully.

"Why! you niggardly old miser, you have enough and to spare, to feed a dozen sturdy lads like your little András boy. What is the use of hoarding? He will never want." And one or two of the older peasants, contemporaries of his own, would try to break through the barrier of old Kemény's impenetrable silence over his own affairs.

"Plenty and to spare?" rejoined the old man crossly,

"when not a groat have I got, even to buy myself a pair of boots. Plenty, indeed, when every florin, every ear of wheat, every blade of grass has to go into my lord of Bideskút's pocket in payment of rent for the tumble-down old farm."

"Then you are either a liar or a fool, old chap, for if it takes every bit of a field to pay the rent of that field, it is the work of an ass to labour it."

And loud laughter greeted this speech of undisputable logic.

This sort of banter angered old Kemény exceedingly, and all reference to his supposed wealth drove him into a perfect fury. As he grew older, therefore, he gradually discontinued every intercourse with his fellow-men, avoided the village altogether, and never walked down the main roads. The labourers all declared that during one entire vintage time he was never once seen to open his lips. He was soon positively hated by all, and deep was the compassion felt for the gentle wife, who had never known a day's pleasure, never been allowed to dance the csárdás, in the great barn on Sunday afternoons, or to join the wedding and christening parties, as they occurred in the village.

As for András, as he grew up, life seemed indeed a dreary thing. His father, who never spared himself, knew no mercy for him. Every season of the year was one of incessant toil for the fast-growing lad. He became his father's overseer, his drudge, his slave; not one single groat did he ever get to spend in merry-making with the young peasants of his own age in the village inn, not one with which to buy a bit of ribbon for the girl who had looked coquettishly at him during Mass on Sunday. From morning to night it was toil in the fields, the yards, or the vineyards, and many

were the heavy blows that fell on his young shoulders from his stern father's knotted stick.

Gradually the bright, sunny expression in his eyes faded, and a kind of defiance seemed to perpetually sit on his proud, handsome face. He was soon old enough to notice that his father was an object of hatred and derision, his mother and himself of contempt and compassion; he saw how much coarser was his linen, how much shabbier his boots than those of the shepherds or herdsmen who worked for wage and slept under the blue vault of heaven; he saw that his mother walked barefoot, whilst Zsuzsi, Panna, Mariska, wore beautiful red boots; he saw that she never put a farthing in the plate for the good old Pater; and all that galled him, and made him hate the tyrant, whose eccentric miserliness deprived him of all the pleasures which made life bright to others as young as himself.

"András! the gipsies over from Gyöngyös are going to play in the barn this afternoon. You will come?" asked a young lad of him one Sunday morning.

András bit his lip hard. He would have loved to go and hear his favourite tunes played by the picked men of the county, and to show the pretty girls how well he could step the csárdás; but gipsy music and pretty girls meant money, fifty kreutzers at least for the one, and twenty for the others for a bit of ribbon or a handkerchief, and András, the rich farmer of Kis-falu's son, had not a copper coin in his pockets.

"I will not come," he said a little sadly.

"The gipsies will have plenty of money from all of us," said another kindly; "it will not matter if you do not give them anything."

"And why should I not give them anything?" retorted András fiercely; "if I wanted to hear the cigány

I could do so. But I said I would not come. It is no one's business to ask my reasons."

"No one did ask you, András," said one of the herdsmen, shrugging his shoulders, whilst another laughed and turned away.

"But I do ask you, why your hair is black and your moustache short. And if you do not tell me why your impudent tongue happens to be red, I will——"

In that country where the sun is hot and the tempers fierce, a quarrel often arises out of the merest banter. A jest roughly expressed and misunderstood, a word inadvertently spoken, and tumultuous passions rise to the surface, like the bubbles in a glass of champagne; knives are brought out, eyes glare, lips are compressed, and often a severe wound, sometimes even a sudden and tragic death, is the outcome of a quarrel of five minutes between comrades of a lifetime.

András had become livid with rage, his eyes glared round him, as if in defiance to the whole village to dare make fun of him. His hand had sought and grasped the heavy clasp-knife inside his belt, and the other fell heavily on the shoulder of the daring mocker, forcing him to turn and face him whom he had ventured to deride.

"Hey! hey! and what do I see? My children, the day of the Lord will surely not be polluted by your quarrels. Kemény András, put back your knife! your mother—ah! she is a saint!—will be waiting at the cross-road for you; shall I go and tell her that I left her only son with a knife in his hand, after he has promised half an hour ago to forgive so that he may be forgiven? Come, come; give me that knife, and do not look so fiercely at me. I am only a weak old man, and not worth quarrelling with."

It was the good old priest who, having said his Mass, was going home for his mid-day meal, his well-worn, shabby old cassock held high above his lean shanks to protect it from the mud. Quite gently he placed his kindly hand on András's wrist, and the young man let fall to the ground the knife that he held.

Then, without a word, he turned and fled towards the cross-road, on the way to Kisfalu, where his mother stood waiting for him.

After that episode he, like his father, ceased to go to church; he wished to avoid the mocking laughter and the kindly sympathy which alike stung and wounded his pride. With passionate devotion he poured all the pent-up flood of his intensely affectionate nature on the mother who bore her hard lot with such exemplary patience. Worked to death almost as he often was on field and farm, he never was too tired to try and lighten some of his mother's tasks. For her he would wash and cook—ay! spin and weave—for the sake of the delight of seeing the loved one rest peacefully for an hour in her arm-chair.

These two, mother and son, were all in all to each other. Their pride had shut them out from their own little world yonder in the village, and even out in their fields. From the head of the house, the father, the husband, they had neither sympathy, nor even ordinary kindness. His greed of money seemed to grow with age. A kind of monomania had seized him. He suspected his own wife and son, and kept his money and his affairs as much hidden from them as from every one else. They knew that he was passing rich, for András by now was an experienced farmer and knew the value of those rich fields, those fine vineyards, those numerous herds of sheep, but the pleasures that those

riches could give, the plentiful fare, the merry-making, dancing, *czigány* music, abundant wine, were all denied to them. As to the authority of him who was her lord and master, and his father, neither wife nor son thought for one moment to question. In that land where civilisation is still in its infancy, a kind of worship surrounds the head of the house; he is placed there by God himself, with divine rights over all his family; they neither question his decisions, however unreasonable they may seem, nor deny him their respect, however thoroughly he may have forfeited it.

And thus a few years sped on, and András was now two-and-twenty: the most hard-worked, the most robust and practical tiller and reaper of the soil on the lowlands. From his hard training he had learned to work without complaint, to be content with little, to keep his own counsel, and to despise money; from his own heart he had learned one thing only, but that he had learned thoroughly, namely to love his mother. All ideas of love in another direction, the love for a being who was not his own flesh and blood, but oh, who was so infinitely dearer, *that* was denied to him. If at times thoughts of a wife and family flitted through his mind,—for does not a hermit also dream of paradise?—he perforce had to chase them away. Old Kemény last year had said:

“I married when I was fifty. When András is that age, I shall be underground, then he can do as he pleases; till then I cannot allow another mouth to be fed under this roof.”

And in this as in all things what could András do but obey? and chase far into the distance dreams of a brighter future?

One memorable day, old Kemény, apparently still

full of vigour, fell, struck as a withered oak by a sudden blast. After a hard day's work in the vineyards, while András had stolen half an hour's respite from wine-pressing in order to help his mother with the bread-baking, two sturdy lads brought the old miser home, on a rough stretcher, put hastily together. He seemed to know no one. His tongue babbled half-articulate sounds, his face was distorted, all awry. The village doctor bled him, and though floods of thick, dark blood flowed from his arm, it seemed in no way to bring him to consciousness. For two long days he still breathed on; András and his mother watched him dutifully to the last. At times they thought that something oppressed the brain already o'erclouded by death; at times the lifeless eyes would almost resuscitate, to glower anxiously round. But whatever he wished to say, whatever parting injunction he may have wished to leave to his son, András never knew; he and his mother did not weep when they at last closed the eyes of their hard taskmaster, gone to his eternal rest. They asked the kind old priest to say a dozen Masses for the repose of his soul, and András, with his own hand, knocked together the boards of oak which contained his father's remains.

Old Kemény found his place among his kind, in the little churchyard of Árokszállás: his wife had twined two wreaths of marguerites and cornflowers, which she placed on his grave; they faded the same afternoon, as the sun was very hot, and they were never replaced.

CHAPTER VI

THE TENANT OF KISFALU

THE village and countryside never actually learned, as it had hoped to do, what wealth András found hidden away after his father's death. And, truly, though old Kemény was eccentric in one way, his son bade fair to outdo him in that respect, for his conduct after his father's death was peculiar in the extreme. For three consecutive years, he and his mother continued their existence at the tumble-down old farmhouse of Kisfalu. True, András would not allow his mother to do any kind of work, and paid two village girls to wash and cook for them both; otherwise their life remained the same. He himself supervised all the labour, and continued his father's dealings with Rosenstein the Jew, but the greater part of his time he spent with the good priest at Árokszállás, who, it soon transpired, taught him to read and to write, and many other things that a peasant lad does not usually learn. Kemény András, whatever his motives were, brought the same energies to bear upon his mental work that he had done upon physical toils. His father, he soon discovered, had, owing to his wonderful avarice and greed of gain, left him a very large amount of money; so large that, at first, András and his mother, accustomed to their constantly empty pockets, hardly realised its full value,

or the benefits which it would confer upon them. Their slowly-thinking peasant minds hardly could understand that all those old wine barrels which had been filled with gold and silver pieces by the eccentric old miser were all absolutely theirs, and meant so much comfort and luxury to them who, up to now, did not know what it was to sleep in a comfortable bed, or to eat their entire fill. Money has so very little meaning in that land of plenty that, just for a moment, András viewed his wealth with a feeling that was almost one of disappointment. He hardly knew himself what he had really expected when with his own hands he had driven the last nails in the boards which covered him who had been the arbitrary master of Kisfalu; hardly knew what he used to hope for when, on hot summer nights, after a hard day's toil, his young shoulders still sore from the paternal correction for some real or imaginary offence, he used to stroll out upon the vast *puszta* and, his gaze lost in the far-off immensity of the horizon, he vaguely wondered at the meaning of the word "happiness."

And those mountains of gold and silver, jingling and glittering, seemed so poor, so tawdry in comparison with those nightly day-dreams. Presently, however, the shrewd mind, inborn in every peasant, rose to the conception, still weak and far distant, of all that riches might mean. He remembered chance derisive words his father had from time to time thrown out, as if involuntarily, on the subject of the heavy sacrifices the lord of Bideskút often made to get a handful of this gold with which to gratify his every whim. If it was not too great a sacrifice to give up bits of land one's ancestors had owned for hundreds of years, in order to handle some of these gold pieces, why then, since they

had as it were dropped into his lap, he would try and learn, study to find out, what was the best use to be made of it. The lord of Bideskút parted with his land to obtain gold, why should not he, Kemény András, the peasant, the son of the eccentric old miser of Kisfalú, part with the gold to gain the land? Oh! to absolutely call some of that loved soil *his*, the soil which from his childhood he had learned to coax into yielding to his avaricious father all the treasures it contained, his own; that he could share all products with his mother, and perhaps, who knows? in time to come with some one else who would call him husband, and some one else wee and very dear, who would learn to say "Father!" Oh! for the delight of owning every grain of wheat, the fleece of every sheep, every drop of milk from his cows, and not to have to give of the first and of the best to the noble lord out there at Bideskút, who never came to Kisfalú, who trafficked with the devil, and allowed Satan to work the land that should have been sacred in his eyes.

András, who had in twenty years of enforced self-restraint learned to keep his own counsels and to whisper to no one what was passing in his mind, never communicated his thoughts to any one. No one knew what treasures were found in old Kemény's coffers, no one knew if the dead man had indeed been a liar or a fool. The work in the field continued. Kemény András's flour was as fine and white as his father's had been, the linen woven from his flax the softest in the county, his wine the most delicately flavoured; no wonder that the Jew traders from Gyöngyös were always seen at Kisfalú, in every season of the year, when there was aught to sell. As for András, who never in his life had bought, sold, or exchanged, he very soon

learned the full value of the products which the fat land yielded him.

For three years he learned from the good old priest how to read, to write, and to reckon; with the patient stolidity with which he had accepted his daily hard tasks from his father, he fulfilled now the task his own shrewd mind had allotted to himself. He soon found out that the Jews played upon the credulity of the peasants, that they presented in a distorted aspect the value of the trifling loans they made, and the usurious interest they received. To fathom the actual value of the exchange, the money for the product, András resolutely imposed the task upon himself. The peasant mind in Hungary is a merry one, full of love for pretty girls, gay dancing, poetic music, but it is obstinate and tenacious, and that tenacity András—who knew little of love or pleasure—applied entirely to the furtherance of his aim.

Little by little, he employed some of his money in improving the old farmhouse, he rendered it comfortable for his mother to live in, and also—he could not himself give any reasons for doing it—he added a few rooms, furnished them cosily with furniture he bought at Gyöngyös, and even papered the walls over the whitewash, which, when finished, caused a veritable procession from the two neighbouring villages to see this luxury which had become far famed.

Gradually, as he felt more at home in his altered circumstances, and saw his mother more happy and cheerful, he lost that taciturnity which his wounded pride had as it were built round him, and began to mix more freely among the peasants in the neighbouring villages. Soon the sunny nature inherent in every Hungarian reasserted itself; gradually he took up every habit

which those of his age pursued. He again went to church with his mother, but now they both stopped at the porch after Mass, and András ventured on looking at the pretty girls in their Sunday finery, and on asking them for a dance or two in the afternoon in the big barn. He did not find them unapproachable: the belief had gained ground that old Kemény had left masses of money, and that András was wealthy beyond any Jew for miles round; ay ! some even asserted that he was becoming almost as rich as the lord of Bide-skút himself.

A certain romanticism hung round him, owing to his lonely childhood, his mysterious learning—which in the minds of his neighbours had assumed boundless proportions,—and above all owing to his manly bearing, his fine eyes, which had retained a certain defiant fierceness, only tempered by his now frequent and cheerful smile. Soon half the village beauties were in love with him, and many were the quarrels with jealous swains that András had to fight out, after the Sunday afternoon dance. But now the venom had gone out of his disposition; the quarrels, fierce for a moment, always ended suddenly by András's cheerful good-natured giving in, and by a couple of bottles of the best wine the county of Heves produced, in which to drown any lurking feeling of jealousy against the handsome youth who was so liberal, and such a merry companion.

But in spite of his attraction towards the fair sex, András was still single, and still the devoted son in prosperity which he had been in time of trouble. He flirted with all, made merry love to many, but not one of the bevy of pretty girls, who trotted briskly to church on Sunday mornings, could boast of having induced

the rich Kemény András to think of sharing his fabulous wealth with her. When the older women or men threw chaffing hints out, as to the probable future mistress of Kisfalu, András would laugh and say:

"Hey! hey! but the pity is I love them all, and I cannot bring the lot to Kisfalu; there is no room, and my dear mother would not approve, and—if I choose—how can I choose one among a hundred beauties—without being very rude to the ninety-nine others that I love?"

If his mother gently expressed a wish to see at some future time her grandsons round her knee, András would throw his arms round her neck, and kiss her rough cheeks.

"Mother," he would say, "there is only one saint in the county of Heves; you are the saint. When an angel comes down from heaven I will ask her to marry me; but until then I will be content to love my saint."

The mother sighed, the girls cried, and András, at five-and-thirty, was still a dutiful son in single blessedness.

CHAPTER VII

PRINCIPAL AND INTEREST

THE hostess had drawn a measure of her oldest wine and placed it on the table which was best shaded from the sun; she was busy with her apron, wiping off any particle of dust that may have remained on the table or bench.

"Hey! but you grow prettier and prettier every day, Zsuzsi, of my soul!" said András's hearty voice close to her ear, as he put an arm round her buxom waist, and imprinted a good sound kiss on the nape of her snow-white neck. "If I were your lord and master, which, for many reasons, I do wish I were, I would not know a moment's peace; he must have a hard time, keeping the fellows off that slim waist of yours."

And András had drawn the pretty woman on his knee, and was making her blush with the admiring glances he cast at her, while drinking deep draughts of her delicious wine.

"Ah, András! you don't know! that is just the trouble!" said the pretty hostess, while a tear or two moistened her eyes, making them appear even brighter than before.

"What is the trouble, Lotti? Tell me. Is it a new ribbon you want, my dove, or a new silk dress for Sunday? Tell me what you want, my pigeon, and

you shall have it; only do not cry, in Heaven's name, for I cannot stand it."

"No, no! it is not a ribbon, or even a dress, András," said the pretty woman, now fairly bursting into tears. "What is the good of my good looks when my husband has ceased to love me?"

"Ceased to love you, my rose? Has Kálmán gone blind? or has he gone squinting in another direction?"

"I don't know which it is, but I know he does not love me; András," she added, her voice shaking with tears, "he has not beaten me for three weeks!"

András gave a long whistle.

"Whew! that is serious! and you?—"

"Oh! I gave him plenty of cause! I danced the csárdás with Horthy Rezső, for two hours, till I was ready to faint, and actually did drop into his arms, but when I came home, Kálmán, who had been there and seen it all, and even saw Rezső kiss me after the csárdás, went quietly to bed, and never even as much as boxed my ears."

And the neglected wife burst into a deluge of tears.

"It is very humiliating," she added between her sobs. "Panna, last Sunday, could scarcely move her back, or lift her arm, and Lujza had quite a deep blue mark across her shoulders. That is real love, if you like; their husbands must have loved them deeply to be so jealous that they beat them like that. I could not show as much as a pinch on my arm, so I wore my sleeves long to hide my shame."

"There! there! my pretty flower," said András, consolingly, "leave off crying, and promise to dance every csárdás with me next Sunday, and I will swear that I will squeeze that slim waist of yours so tightly and look so deeply into your bright eyes, that Kálmán

will break his stick across your pretty back for jealous rage. Come, bring out some wine for that old scarecrow of a Jew over there; he looks hot and thirsty, and I want some talk with him, which I cannot do if his mouth is parched and dry.—Here, give me another kiss—another—and another.—Why, the devil take him! if Kálmán saw me now, there would not be a white spot left on those plump shoulders of yours, they would be black and blue, fit to make Panna, Lujza, and the lot of them green with envy.”

Laughing, quite consoled, the buxom landlady ran back into the cottage, and half reluctantly placed a large jug of wine before the Jew.

Rosenstein had sat very patiently in his corner, the last rays of the setting sun falling upon his meagre back; he looked a comic figure, like some huge scarecrow outlined against the sky; quietly he had waited while Kemény András pursued his flirtation with the hostess, but his bird-like face brightened up when he heard the young peasant ordering a measure of wine for him. He was not accustomed to attentions of this sort from any one, except from good-natured András, who knew from his own earlier experiences what it was to be very hot, very thirsty, and without a bottle of wine before him.

“Now, my pretty pigeon, go in!” said András, giving the young woman another parting kiss. “What I have to say to this old Jew is of no interest to those pink ears, which are only made to hear words of love.”

“You send me away?” she said with a pout; “you are going to talk secrets and affairs with that horrid old Rosenstein. Why must I not hear? I can keep

secrets—You are not going to borrow money of him, are you?"

"No, my soul, you may be sure of that," said András, laughing, "so run away. The secrets Rosenstein and I are going to talk about are neither worth the keeping, nor the gossiping."

The pretty hostess, willy-nilly, had to go; András had learned throughout his life the lesson of obedience so completely that he had an irresistible way of teaching it to all those with whom he came in contact.

He beckoned to Rosenstein, and the Jew, hastily finishing his wine, came near with that humble obsequiousness and deferential smile which those of his race have for centuries been taught to wear.

"Well, old scarecrow! tired of waiting, eh?" said András, genially. "Hey! hey! pretty women will take up such a lot of a fellow's time, and I have wasted so precious little of it that way in my life that I have a great deal of love-making to do before I have my full share of the best side of this world. Come and sit down here in the shade. — Not too near me!" he added, laughing, and making way for Rosenstein on the bench close to him.

The Jew himself was in rare good humour; András's merry laugh was very infectious, and Rosenstein, between his thin lips, made a low, chuckling little noise, which might have passed off for a laugh.

The young peasant pushed jugs and bottles to one side. Wine is heating, and when talking to a Jew the head must be kept very cool; a pipe only is always a good friend and counsellor, and András, throwing back the wide lawn sleeves of his shirt, leaned both elbows on the table, and having filled his long cherry-wood pipe, "I am listening," he said to the Jew.

Rosenstein had taken out of his pocket one of the documents signed that morning—unread—by the lord of Bideskút. The other reposed snugly in an inner pocket, and evidently was not intended for any but his own private perusal.

"The noble lord of Bideskút wanted 250,000 florins," he began; "he is starting his steam-mill on its work to-morrow, and has to pay heavy wages to the Budapesth workmen, whom he is bound to employ, since the men about here will not now go within a league of the building, for fear they should meet the devil."

"Do you really mean to say," said András, incredulously, "that that cursed mill is completed, and that he actually means to work it?"

"Ay, most decidedly he does, in spite of every dissatisfied peasant on his estate, in spite of the fact that Pater Ambrosius specially said Masses for the destruction by fires from Heaven of the building of Lucifer. It is, in fact, to begin work to-morrow or the day after. His corn, all lying in magnificent stacks, is ready to be threshed by the supernatural agency, and that which is already threshed will be ground into finer flour than the Bánát has ever known, at the word of command of the devil and his satellites."

The Jew had said this with many sarcastic intonations, but András, who, in spite of his learning, had not quite shaken off all peasant superstitions, listened to him with awe and incredulity.

"I think my lord is a fool," he said at last; "if there was the slightest use or good to be gained by employing three men instead of twenty, and spending the wages of two hundred in doing so, I could understand it. But this flour will not be any finer by it, and he

will enrage every peasant on his estate. He is a fool !”

“ He certainly is under the impression that he will become the richest man this side of the Tarna, and in the meanwhile is busy ruining himself in trying to become rich. However, according to your wish, I handed him over the 250,000 florins on the following security and interest——”

“ Hold on, old man! I said I would not lend any more. I wish to buy.”

Rosenstein shook his head.

“ I did all I could. I offered what money my lord cared to ask. He will not sell.”

A look of very deep disappointment clouded over the young peasant's face, the hand which held the pipe closed so tightly over the slender stem that it nearly broke it in half.

“ He is a fool,” he repeated after a slight pause. “ The loans are not for a great number of years and, though the interest is low, he will never be able to repay the capital, which he is spending entirely on that confounded machinery and building of his. Sooner or later he will have to part with the land. I want it now, to-day. I am rich. I would pay him any money he wants. He is a fool.”

“ The noble lord says he will not part with a foot of his land to a peasant or to a Jew.”

“ Then, by God !—” said András, bringing his heavy fist crashing down upon the table.

The shaft which the Jew had with wondrous cunning aimed at his client had struck home. The insult supposed to have been hurled at the peasant by bracketing him with one of the despised race made András's cheeks livid with rage, but the old habit of self-

restraint got the better of him. Before this man whom he employed he forced himself to remain calm, and repeated very quietly:

"He is a fool!"

"Look," said the Jew, eagerly, "your position is better and better every year. Bideskúty Gyuri has now mortgaged every foot of his land to you, with the exception of the house and garden of Bideskút itself, and a few stables round. Mark my words, the money you lent him to-day, on the security of Zárda, will not last him six months at the present rate at which he is spending every florin he gets. Six months hence he will want some more, and then, more and more again. You have plenty, you could let him have plenty, but he will not have a foot of land left to mortgage. Then you can foreclose at a small additional sacrifice; and the land is yours."

"He will then try and get the money with which to meet his debts from those whom he calls his equals," said András, surlily.

"They never have any ready money to spare, those noble lords on the lowlands; they spend every kreutzer they have in eating, drinking, and trying to outdo their neighbours in splash and gorgeousness; moreover, since you were willing to lend more money on the land than it is honestly worth, no one would care to take on the mortgages."

"No more they would if the money had been lent by one of your tribe, and the usurious interest almost ruined the owner of the land. What I ask is so low. Any one can pay it and yet make a large profit for themselves."

"I know! I know!" said the Jew, hastily. "I have often advised you to ask more reasonable interest."

"I cannot do usury. I must place my money since I have got it, and I wish to buy the land, but my mother and I will not dirty our fingers with usury. What interest is my lord paying me for this last 250,000?"

"Five thousand measures of wheat, forty head of cattle, and fifty sheep," said Rosenstein, handing the document across to András. Anxiously he watched the young man's face, while he read.

"Yes, that is all right enough," said András, folding the paper and putting it into his pocket.

"I wonder now," he added, "what profit you are making out of this."

"You know best, that I make none, save what you are good enough to give me."

"Well, I gave you two hundred florins to do this work, are you satisfied?"

"Oh, perfectly, perfectly. I am a poor man and——"

"If ever I hear that you have cheated me in any of these dealings, I will break every bone in that shrivelled-up old body of yours."

"You are joking! How could I cheat you? even if I wished, which I swear by Abraham I would never think of doing. You have seen the document signed by the lord of Bideskút; you do not imagine he would sign without reading?"

"No, I don't imagine he would be quite such a fool! but I daresay he gives you a little something for yourself: does n't he?"

"Well—yes—he offered me one hundred florins this morning, and," added the Jew with a peculiar hissing sound between his teeth, "he gave me a good dinner."

"Ah! well then! that is all right, old scarecrow!

is n't it? You do not often have a good dinner; you are too mean to feed yourself properly. So he fed you well, did he? I am glad of that. I hope you thanked him well."

"There was no time to do much thanking to-day," said the Jew, "but my thanks will keep. I hope in about two years' time to have repaid him in full, for the good dinner he gave me this morning. He! he! he!" he added, rubbing his thin hands gleefully together, "I am deeply in the debt of the most honourable lord! but Moritz Rosenstein never forgets, give him two years, and he will repay, he won't mind the interest, he! he! he! he! he will pay that too—in full."

András had ceased to listen to him; he had taken out Bideskúty's note of hand, and read it through very carefully. Evidently he was fully satisfied with its contents, for again he folded it up, and replaced it in the inner pocket of his jacket.

Dreamily he continued smoking, taking no heed of Rosenstein, his gaze riveted far across the plain towards that distant sunset, beyond which lay that loved land which, from his childhood, he had tended and tilled, in sorrow and with bitter tears, for the tyrant who now lay underground. To acquire that land, and now make it all his own, was the dream which filled his mind, unformed, half-educated as it was. It was a dream that had risen within him from the moment he realised that wealth was within his grasp. For that one aim, he toiled by day and studied by night. No labour was too hard, no task too difficult. He knew the noble's hereditary contempt for the peasant, guessed that it would be a hard matter to force the lord of Bideskút to sell his land to the despised, low-born

peasant, thus laying as it were the seeds of equality between them, but in time he hoped he would win, already he held heavy mortgage on that land he loved so well. It was almost, but not quite, his own. Rosenstein promised that soon it would be his. Lovingly he scanned the flat horizon, tried to look beyond the sunset, past the barren plain, whose soil now looked cool and grey, in contrast to the brilliant gold of the last rays of the setting sun. There lay Kisfalu with its rich fields, its green vineyards, the house where he was born, where lived his mother, where, please God and his own indomitable will, his son would also be born, live and die in peace, his own ground, his own land, his! his! his!

As for Rosenstein, he was nursing pleasant dreams of wealth coupled with vengeance. He was content to sit quietly, and think over the time when the proud man, who had made him the jest and jeer of his servants, would perforce be leaving his ancestral home, and he, the despised Jew, who had received many a caning within its walls, would buy it, under the hammer; for beneath it, it would come; nothing could save it, considering the usurious interest Bideskúty Gyuri was paying unbeknown to the proud young peasant, who had learned much, but not enough to be quite even with a Jew.

"It is getting late, András," said the pretty hostess, coming to the door; "you have a good three hours' ride before you, if you are going back to Kisfalu, remember."

"I am going back home," said András, rousing himself from his day-dreams. "Come and kiss me for being such an attentive time-keeper. Here are ten florins for the wine I have drunk, and the oats Csillag

has eaten, and mind you have that new bit of ribbon in your hair next Sunday, and won't we make Kálmán jealous over the csárdás? Two hours, mind! heigho! Csillag, my beauty, are you rested? and has that featherbrain of a woman given you a good measure of oats? Here, old scarecrow, next week I shall want to see you about some lambs you can sell for me. I have two hundred beauties. I shall want a heavy price for them. You can come over to Kisfalú. We shall be busy threshing. Good-night, my pigeon; give us a kiss and tell Kálmán he is a blind fool. God be with you! Come, Csillag!"

And saddleless, stirrupless, without use of bit or rein, András jumped on his lovely mare, and waving a last adieu to the pretty hostess, galloped away towards the sunset, and was soon but a mere speck upon the vast horizon.

Rosenstein looked a long time after him. His pale eyes twinkled, his lips parted in an acid smile, his thin hand felt coaxingly for the second document signed by Bideskúty Gyuri, which contained some clauses that would have cost the Jew many a broken bone at the hands of the young man who had galloped away so merrily. Then he too turned his back upon the inn, and went his way.

CHAPTER VIII

FIRST ARRIVALS

"I THINK, after all, I will wear my blue sash and bows, Róza, the pink will make me look so pale. Oh, dear! oh, dear! how late it is! I have heard the *czigány* tune up half an hour ago; I shall never get dressed to-day."

And the little maid rushed hither and thither, bustling round her young mistress, changing the blue sash for the pink, then, back again to the blue, arranging a stray golden curl, putting a stitch here and there, eager, excited, and proud. Proud of such a mistress, the prettiest heiress in the lowlands. Bideskúty Ilonka, then barely seventeen, was reputed to be the beauty of the countryside, the fairest in that land where all women are fair, with the graceful, yet full figure of the Hungarian race, the peach-like skin, the golden hair, and forget-me-not eyes, that are calculated to drive any inflammable Magyar heart to despair. Since, according to the noble hostess of Bideskút, it is the duty of every aristocratic Hungarian girl to be beautiful, Ilonka certainly fulfilled that duty to absolute perfection, and the Countess, her mother, had little fear but that her daughter would fulfil her other duty with equal perfection, and make the most suitable marriage her fond motherly heart could desire.

Downstairs the agitation was becoming positively

electrical. The Countess herself, in the tight-fitting silk dress that had formed part of her trousseau, and had passed through many stages of promiscuous and antiquated attempts at modernisation, was giving her final look round to the gorgeously laid-out table in the big hall. The heavy oak buffet, which stood the whole length of the hall, almost broke down under the weight of the huge dishes of meat and fish of every description, that filled every available corner, whilst the two horse-shoe tables literally creaked beneath the enormous baskets of grapes and melons which threw a penetrating scent around.

Gigantic bottles of wine stood ready to hand, between each of two guests, and a couple of huge casks on tall trestles each side of the buffet were ready tapped, in case the bottles did not prove sufficient. The valets in their best tight-fitting Magyar frock coats, and still tighter breeches, with boots of the shiniest leather, lined the lower hall below, awaiting the arrivals. Outside a band of *czigány*, the *czimbalom* player in the middle, the leader well to the fore, had turned ready to strike up the *Rákóczy* march directly the distant cracking of a whip would announce the first arrival.

The Countess Irma expected one or two of the nearer neighbours in time for mid-day dinner: they would come in their own coaches all the way from either side of the Tarna. *Bideskút* had supplied the relays for those of the guests who came from a considerable distance, and already the day before carriages had gone off in every direction from which the main road branched off and visitors might be expected to arrive; whilst the smartest coaches harnessed with the pick of the *Bideskút* stables had been sent overnight to Gyöngyös, to bring from the railway station there those who from

the still more distant counties were obliged to travel by train. These would mostly be the younger and smarter people, who had been to Budapesth, or even to Vienna, and had become accustomed to those terrible inventions of Satan, akin to Bideskúty's threshing machines, the railway trains. All older people preferred the mode of travelling that had been good enough for their fathers and their grandfathers—the cumbersome but comfortable barouche harnessed with four sure-footed Hungarian horses from their own herds, who did not rush along at devilish speed on metal tracks, which surely never were forged anywhere but in Satan's own workshop.

Huzza ! Hurrah ! The distant shouts, the thundering gallop of horses, and clinking of harness, announced about eleven o'clock the first arrivals. "Tune up, *czigány* !" thunders Bideskúty's voice from an upper window, and at a sign from the leader the *czimbalom* starts the opening bars of that most inspiring *Rákóczy* march. . . . Here they come! the *Kantássys*, the nearest neighbours, who only live some twenty leagues away, and have driven over in two carriages full; they are a large family, and bring several servants. Intensely Magyar in character is their turn-out, their coachmen and grooms wearing the national costume, full white lawn trousers and sleeves that flutter in the wind, short, gaily-embroidered leather jacket, round cap, and shiny boots. With the most dexterous precision the driver guides his fiery team of five Hungarian horses, three leaders and two wheelers, through the wide-open gates of Bideskút, to a perfect standstill before the door. Their brilliant red leather harness, with their quaint tassels, and shiny brass bosses, glitters and jingles in the hot mid-day air,

Three prettily dressed girls, two young men, the portly Count Kantássy, and his thin, sour-looking wife, all step out of the big coaches, and find their way, chattering, eager, and excited, through the hall, and up the stairs past the Hun warrior's frowning statue.

"*Isten hozta !*" (God has brought you), many handshakes and kisses are exchanged, as Jankó solemnly opens the sitting-room door where Bideskúty and his wife await their guests.

"Why, Mariska, how tall you have grown! and, Sarolta, I would not have known you, and little Emmie is growing a pretty girl after all!" says the hostess, as each of the young girls, with a little curtsy, comes up daintily to kiss her hand.

The Countess Kantássy's eldest daughter, and her own Ilonka, were of an age, and decidedly likely to be rival beauties; but Countess Irma noted with satisfaction that Mariska had two pimples on her forehead, which showed very conspicuously, though her mother had made her bring a curl right down on purpose to hide them.

The girls stand aside, modest and blushing, while their parents talk; the mothers, after the first few remarks on the subject of the bad roads, are already discussing the probable *partis* in view; the fathers expatiating on the perfection of the harvest this year, and the promise of a glorious vintage.

"I cannot tell you, my dear," whispers Countess Kantássy, volubly, "how much Bartócz Zsiga admires Mariska; he would in every way be a suitable *parti* for her, but unfortunately he is, as you know, in the diplomatic, and in France and in England he has gathered a notion that girls ought to do other things besides looking pretty. I believe those foreign girls are ter-

ribly forward; some of them read novels, and go out by themselves. Thank goodness! there is nothing of the sort about Mariska; she is as modest and innocent as ever I could wish."

"She is indeed a pretty girl!" says the hostess, with a decided want of conviction, "and Bartócz Zsiga would be an excellent *parti* for her. Of course, you know that we have refused him for Ilonka."

"You surprise me, my dear," replied the Countess, with some acidity. "I should have thought that Ilonka was not at all his style. Only the other day he was saying that he thought she was too fair. Don't you think so yourself? No? Ah, well! perhaps you may be fortunate in finding a man who admires that pale complexion; I found that Mariska's pink cheeks were immensely admired."

"Ilonka, so far, has never lacked admirers," rejoins the hostess, sweetly; "indeed, we find it quite an occupation to refuse marriage proposals for her, she has so many."

"Well, you see, dearest," retorts the Countess Kantássy, as a parting shot, "she is an only child, and men know that she will inherit the whole of Bideskút and Kisfalu, and that she will have Zárda as a dowry. . . . But where is the dear child?" she adds, feeling that, perhaps, the conversation was becoming uncomfortable. "Mariska, my child, I feel sure Countess Irma will allow you to go to Ilonka, who must have finished dressing; you will be glad to see each other."

"Yes, mama!"

"Sarolta and Emmike may go too."

"Yes, mama!"

And the three girls, glad to get away from the

overawing presence of their elders, prepared to leave the room.

"Stay, Mariska! you may all three take off your hats and gloves, and arrange your hair, before you come down again."

"Yes, mama!"

And like little birds out of their cage, the three girls, making an old-fashioned curtsey, fluttered out of the room.

"They are charming!" says the hostess, condescendingly.

"I think they are very well brought up," admits the fond mother, proudly.

"My good friend," here breaks in the stentorian voice of the portly Count Kantássy, "believe me, your craze about those absurd machines is absolutely without common-sense. Did not your father and my father, your grandfather and my grandfather, sow and reap the finest corn in the world, and grind it into the whitest flour, without the help of those outlandish inventions? What do you hope to get with them? except to fall into the hands of the Jews; for those things cost money, which, so far, thank God, none of us have had any need of."

"My dear fellow, in England—" began Bideskúty with a wise expression of face.

"Hey! do not talk to me about that accursed country. What do I know about it, except that it is near the sea, that their corn is coarser than that which we give to our pigs, and that they make wine out of gooseberries? I ask you what can they know about corn? or about grapes? Why the devil don't they produce them with their inventions of Satan?"

"Think of the labour and the fatigue it will save!"

"Whose labour? whose fatigue? That of the lazy, good-for-nothing peasant. You give him more leisure to enrich himself, till he will own more land than we do, and drive us nobles out of our homes, very much like those cursed Jews are beginning to do. As long as you make the peasant work for you, and give him no wages and plenty of kicks, he will respect and fear you. Give him time to work for himself, to become rich, to own big lands, and he will begin to think that he is your equal, and want to kneel beside you at church in your pew, and think that his son can marry your daughter."

"There is no difficulty in keeping the peasant in his proper place, even the rich ones; now there is Kemény András, who rents my farm at Kiszalu. That man is reputed to own some four or five millions of money, which his miserly old father is said to have left in wine barrels, and yet he is perfectly content to rent Kiszalu from me; and I am sure, whenever I meet him, he always most politely takes his cap off to me, as his ground landlord."

"And you mean to tell me that there is a peasant on your estate who owns millions of money? Somebody has been stuffing you up with fairy tales, my friend."

"It is no fairy tale, though the amount may be a trifle exaggerated; he certainly has a very great deal of money, and does a good trade, I am told, with his beasts and his wine."

"Well, then, I call it confoundedly impudent of a peasant to be so rich. I wonder he has not offered to buy some of your land from you!"

"No, he has never done that. Some people think he does quiet money-lending on his own account, but

that I cannot say. I have never had anything to do with him."

"No, but I suppose you have a Jew or two with whom you deal?" suggested Count Kantássy, with a loud laugh. "Those confounded mills must have cost a pot of money."

"Yes, they have," said poor Bideskúty, shaking his head at the remembrance of the ruinous transaction he concluded yesterday; "and those confounded Jews charge such terrible percentage. I soon shall not have enough flour of my own to provide this house with bread. I should not mind if that miserly Kemény András would buy a bit of land from me."

"Has he never asked you to sell him Kisfalu?"

"Never, that I know of; that is the curious thing about it all. I often wish he would, because, of course, I cannot offer the property to him."

"He seems to be sensible enough to know his own place," retorted the Count; "a peasant indeed! owning that beautiful Kisfalu."

"He has, in any case, plenty of money. What he does with it I cannot imagine. After all, the dream of every peasant ever since they were made free is to own a bit of land all his own."

"A piece of land, his own?" rejoins the irate Count. "My good Bideskúty, where in the world have you picked up those new-fangled notions? Do they come across from England, together with those God-forsaken machines? Because, if so, believe me, let the whole lot sink to the bottom of the sea, together with that beer-producing country, which may the devil take away. Their own indeed! Time was, when I was a youngster, when let alone the land, but even their lazy, good-for-nothing bodies belonged to the nobles, they

and their sons, ay, and their daughters too ! And now you talk of their owning land, their becoming rich ! Preposterous ! ”

And the fat old Count, portly and apoplectic, turned away in disgust from his friend who held such ridiculous notions, in order to appeal to the lady who had begun life by stating that “humanity began with the Barons,” and from whom, therefore, he was always sure of warm support. “Whom do you expect to-day ?” asked Countess Kantássy, throwing herself nobly in the breach. She was not quite sure whether her husband’s last remark was altogether good form, and thought a change of conversation would be beneficial.

“We expect most of our guests, who come by train. The Egregyis, I think, are sure to drive, for you know Aunt Irma has never been on the railway in her life; they might not arrive till to-morrow, as the roads have been very bad all the way. But the Bartócz, the Madáchs, the Palotays, and two or three more, will be here almost directly. I believe the train comes in some time during the morning,” she added vaguely; “it usually has a long wait at Palota, for the Baroness is never ready, and they always wait for her.”

“I do believe here they are !” says Bideskúty with delight, sure now to escape another assault from his friend on the subject of his beloved machines.

CHAPTER IX

BEAUTIFUL ILONKA

THUNDERING gallop outside, shouting, yelling, and laughter, proclaim the arrival of the carriages from Gyöngyös railway station. In a moment the huge house is filled as with a crowd. Groups of young girls fluttering like chickens round their mamas, portly papas mopping their beading foreheads—for the sun is grilling on this August day,—maids, valets, and couriers seeking and finding their sweethearts they had left last year, stealing kisses, exchanging "*Isten hozta*" (God has brought you), till the hall, the stairs, and passages would seem to a sober-minded Englishman a very pandemonium, peopled with semi-lunatics.

The hostess has to find an amiable word for all: one of praise for the beauty of every girl, of admiration for the bearing of every young man; compliments to the mamas and papas on the charms of their progeny. As for Bideskúty, the host, he is laughingly assailed on all sides by inquiries after his machines and his mills: the laughing-stock of all these easy-going, prosperous, aristocratic sons of the Hungarian soil. Surely it is folly to talk of improving a land that produces so much prosperity, that yields such boundless hospitality.

The young girls, with becoming shyness, keep close to their mamas' petticoats; each comes forward in the approved fashion to kiss the Countess Irma's hand,

and receive a friendly tap on the blushing cheek. The young men clap their heels together and make the most military of salutes. Most of them are still in the "one year's volunteer's" uniform of some cavalry regiment; some show by their more serious manner and the foreign cut of their clothes that they are preparing for the diplomatic service; others in rough homespuns, and tight-fitting Hungarian breeches and shiny leather boots, intend, obviously, to serve neither country nor government, but to stay at home, as their fathers have done, and superintend the tilling of the land that will become their own.

"But where is Ilonka?" is the general question that comes from every side; while Kantássy, with the privilege of an old friend, and a noted wag, declares that he will go and fetch her, even if she is still in her bath.

The Countess Kantássy has just time to protest: "In Heaven's name, Jenö, do be careful how you speak!" and to note with satisfaction that the innocent ears of her daughters have been spared their father's profligate talk, when a merry peal of laughter is heard from the garden below, and old Baron Palotay, who is a near relative, playfully rushes to one of the windows, and pulls the curtains to.

"Only for money!" he declares. "The sight is worth a florin a-piece."

And indeed the picture outside was worth a heavy price to see. In a simple white muslin dress, her fair hair tied in a graceful knot at the back of her tiny head, her wide-brimmed hat fallen down her back, thus framing the daintiest face that ever smiled on mankind, Ilonka was plucking a few roses, her only ornaments, and tying them in a knot for her belt. No wonder the younger men crowded to the windows to watch the

dainty apparition, no wonder the mamas looked enviously at the fairest among the fair, no wonder the Countess Irma, with characteristic pride, looked triumphantly at her female guests, and musingly at the group of men, from which she would have no difficulty in selecting a most suitable *parti*.

Five minutes later the radiant apparition, followed by the three Kantássy girls, whose by no means despicable beauty acted but as a foil to her own charms, came in fresh and rosy, as merry as a lark, conscious of her own beauty, like a very little queen, gladdening her courtiers with her presence.

"An old uncle's privilege, my dear," asserted old Palotay, as he imprinted a kiss on the pretty girl's cheeks, and all the young men looked as if they wished their hair would suddenly turn white, and earn them the same coveted privilege.

But Ilonka smiled and curtsied to all with equal grace, kissed the fat or lean hands of the elder ladies, allowed, smiling, every elderly man to kiss her pretty cheek. Only the sharp eyes of her mother noted the scarcely perceptible blush, the faint quiver of the delicate eyelid, the softly whispered "God has brought you!" when she first caught sight of Madách Feri.

He was a young man who still wore the one year's volunteer's uniform of a Hussar regiment; tall and slenderly built, he looked exceedingly handsome in the tight-fitting tunic and scarlet breeches that made a bright patch of colour beside Ilonka's white gown. But his father had wasted his son's patrimony in overlavish hospitality; the ancestral home had fallen into the hands of the Jews, and the Madáchs lived in a small house at Kecskemét, and could not afford to put their son into the diplomatic service. There had been

some talk of his marrying the daughter of a rich Viennese merchant. But, most unaccountably, the young man seemed obstinate, and old Count Madách apparently had no influence over his son, and allowed him to remain single when a rich marriage, which would have retrieved the fallen fortunes and regilt the ancestral coronet, should have been contracted long ago. Feri was said to have a leaning for the army, which was not considered a very aristocratic profession for a descendant of the ancient family of Madách, whose ancestry was lost in the mazes of the Tartar invasion. No wonder, therefore, that Countess Irma frowned when she noted her daughter's blush, and heard the tone of that "*Isten hozta*" (God be with you), so sweet and so heartfelt. Ilonka, however, unconscious of the gathering storm, stood happy and blushing now, laughing merrily, promising dances for this evening's ball, and agreeing to innumerable riding, boating, and fishing parties for the next few days.

Five minutes later, the big hall clock strikes the hour of two, and punctual to the minute old Jankó opens the doors, and announces that the Countess is served.

All are equal in this hospitable house, there is no formula of etiquette or precedence; jovially the host and hostess show the way, and young and old, with much laughter and pleasant anticipation, file into the dining-hall. Already the gipsy band is stationed at one end; as the guests come in, they start the merriest csárdás, and keep it up till every one has found the place they wanted most, next to the person near whom they would prefer to sit.

At the head of the table the good-looking face of the host beams delighted on his guests; whilst at the opposite end the Countess, enthroned like a queen,

listens to the various compliments on the beauty of her table-decorations, the size of her fruit, the picturesqueness of her garden. Perhaps she is aware that half the flattering speeches are but the usages of a flowery language, the custom of the country; she has to do the same when she, in her turn, visits her neighbours, although she may be convinced that all her arrangements, her household, and her cuisine are superior to those of every other mortal in the world. Still flattery is pleasant to listen to, when one is convinced that, in any case, it falls far beneath the reality.

Well out of sight of her mother, Ilonka sits, blushing and happy. Feri has, with wonderful tactics, secured a seat next to her, and, with delight, the young people can look forward to sitting side by side for at least three hours; for surely all that food and drink will take their elders some time to consume. With a loud "*Éljen!*" (Long live!) directed with full glasses towards the host and hostess, the company have fallen to; and for fully five minutes, while the first hunger is appeased with a plateful of steaming soup, nought interrupts the merry music of the *czigány*, save the clink of glasses, and of silver spoons.

The servants go round briskly to fill and refill the glasses as they become rapidly empty; and after the first few minutes the tongues are loosened again.

Poor Bideskúty has to endure a vigorous attack from every side on the eternal subject of his new mill and machinery. Obstinate, he holds his ground, propounds his theories, of which he himself is not very clear. The entire bevy of his older guests, all in his own rank of life, and most of them prosperous, rich landowners, prophesy the most dire disasters, which are sure to befall him, if he persist in his new-fangled notions

brought from abroad, from the blowing up of the infernal machine by the revengeful flames of heaven to the revolt of the entire peasantry against these inventions of the devil. The idea of any improvement in the way in which many generations had carried on their farming was, to these Magyar nobles, nothing short of the ravings of a lunatic; it was an unheard-of precedent in the history of the Hungarian lowlands.

But the lord of Bideskút had nursed his fad ever since, a young boy, his father had first tried to drive it out of his head; fostered by opposition, it had grown to a conviction. He was sanguine of success. In order to pander to his craze originally he had dipped pretty deeply in borrowed coffer; now, like the true gambler, he staked more and more, secure in the conviction that ultimately fortune would be his, a boundless fortune, built on the secure foundation of his highly improved produce obtained at a minimum cost of time and labour.

Bideskúty had with infinite patience perused a number of heavy books which he had sent for from Budapesth, and had persuaded himself that he was thoroughly imbued with the progressive notions of Western countries. In imagination he saw himself the recognised authority on matters agricultural from the confines of Poland to the shores of the Lajtha. From the perusal of those heavy books he had gathered, with an infinitesimal and somewhat addled quantity of knowledge, a certain desire for something different to his present mode of life; he began to dream of riches; he who came from a race that were content to live from the product of the soil began to have vague, undefined longings for other luxuries besides that of fine white bread and rich old wines; the word

"progress" was just beginning to have a distinct though still obscure meaning for him, and he was beginning to realise that the life of a Hungarian noble on his estate might perhaps be better filled than by watching his corn grow, or breaking wild horses into harness. Sometimes the original old man would crop up, as when he found amusement in terrorising Rosenstein, but, on the whole, a vague feeling of his dignity as a man lurked in his mind beside the empty pride of ancestry.

At the farther end of the table, Ilonka had at last broken the happy silence.

"They told me you were not coming," she said, after they each had eaten their soup.

"But you knew better," he rejoined.

"Well, I did not know. I heard you had been to Budapesth for the carnival, and I thought——"

"You could not have thought anything but that you are fairer than the most beautiful girl I could meet anywhere, and that whenever I looked at a pretty face in Budapesth I thought all the more of you."

"You thought of me?" she said with playful astonishment.

"You know I did, Ilonka," said the young man with suppressed passion, "you know I——"

"Hush! hush!" she said nervously, "mama is looking, and I am sure Madame de Kantássy can hear."

He had perforce to whisper very low, so low that not even the flies could hear as they buzzed lazily overhead. But Ilonka must have heard something, something that made her blush, and cast her blue eyes down on her plate. It was very pleasant to be talking thus, to be nibbling slyly at the forbidden fruit, whilst mama's eyes

had perforce to wander everywhere, and the noise of talk and laughter, and that of the gay *czigány* band, drowned the sound of the young man's whispered words.

"I shall pass my officer's examination next month, Ilonka," said Feri, tentatively.

"Yes?"

"And then I shall pray for another war against the Prussians."

"Why? you might have to go and get killed."

"Yes, I might," he said smiling, "that certainly would be a most complete solution of the difficulty. But, if I lived to do something great, enormous, which would draw the attention of my country on my poor self, then, perhaps——"

"Yes," she said, "then—perhaps."

They both lapsed into silence, and from Ilonka's eyes a tear fell down on the bunch of roses in her belt.

"Perhaps!" They both knew what a vague word that was; they both felt that however great their love, however deep their sorrow, their whole fate and happiness depended on that problematical "perhaps," the consent of the parents, without which no well-born girl in Hungary could marry, slave as she is to their old-fashioned whims, their considerations of rank and wealth, all the glitter which is necessary to the old, and seems so paltry, so tawdry to the young.

"Ilonka, you have made me very happy," said the young man, after a slight pause.

"Happy? How?" she asked innocently.

"By saying 'perhaps.'"

The servants were handing round the meat, the fruit, the salads. All round them was noise, gaiety, loud laughter, sometimes coarse jest. These two sat, like

tiny birds hidden beneath overhanging boughs, secure from storm and stress of weather without, content to steal a few glances from each other's eyes, to snatch a word of what lay nearest to their heart, in the intervals of evading the prying eyes of their elders.

"Beautiful Ilonka is very silent over there," came in loud, laughing accents from the farther end of the table, and old Kantássy, boisterous and good-humoured, raised an overflowing glass of wine high above his head.

"I drink to the prettiest girl on the lowlands," he added rising. "Beautiful Ilonka, to your bright eyes, to your pink cheeks, and your merry laugh, which I have not heard this last half-hour."

This was an excuse for refilling the glasses, and all the young people got up, and walked round to where Ilonka was sitting, blushing to the very roots of her hair, and touched glasses with her, and said, "*Éljen!*" (Long live!); the young girls all kissed her, the young men looked as if they wanted to, the old ones took leave without permission; and so the hubbub lasted for quite a long time, every one's attention being drawn to Ilonka, so that the one topic of conversation which interested her was perforce interrupted during that time.

Presently, however, young Bartócz, who was just out of the Oriental Academy, and was going into the diplomatic service, rose to make an elaborate speech in honour of the hostess's birthday. Every one was deeply interested, and Ilonka had occasion to whisper sadly:

"It is not much use thinking of it; mama will never consent."

"What do you think your father will say, Ilonka?"

She shook her pretty head wisely.

"Papa is too much worried with his machines and

his arguments with the peasants: he will listen to anything mama says, in order to have peace at home."

"Ilonka, I wish we had lived many hundred years ago."

"Why?"

"Because, then, I could have come on Kópé's back, in the middle of the night, and climbed the walls of Bideskút with the aid of a rope and carried you away with me by force, in spite of mother and father and everybody. Money did not matter in those days, nor family either. All were equal, and a man could marry whom he loved."

"Yes, that must have been nice not to have had to ask mama whom one may love."

"You cannot ask that now, Ilonka," he corrected seriously; "nobody can dictate to you as to whom you should love."

"What is the use of loving," she rejoined innocently, "if you may not marry whom you love?"

"There is much joy to me, Ilonka, in loving you, even though——"

"Hush! hush! I am sure mama is looking this way."

The young man from the Oriental Academy had finished speaking; once more the ceremony had to be gone through of touching glasses with the hostess, and wishing her a happy birthday. Ilonka was obliged, like every one else, to go up to her mother, to kiss her hand, and speak a short speech of felicitations. Her young heart, still only half understanding the emotions that threatened to fill it, went out for one moment to the mother who held her whole fate in her hands. When she had wished her pretty birthday wish, instead of demurely kissing her mother's hand, she threw her

arms impetuously round her neck and asked for a loving kiss.

"Ilonka, my child, you will crush your dress," said the Countess Irma, reprovingly.

And Ilonka, vaguely feeling as if she had done something wrong, something she knew not what, went back to her place quite shy and tearful.

CHAPTER X

A LOVE IDYLL

AFTER this, gaiety became decidedly more boisterous; the men-servants were kept constantly busy, filling and re-filling the glasses and the bottles out of the great casks, one of these having already run dry. The *czigány* were not allowed, even for a moment, to stop the music, and, hot and panting, they kept up the lively *csárdás* with much spirit. The good Hungarian wine was getting into the heads of some of the noble Hungarian barons there, and a quantity of wine in their heads invariably produces the most passionate fondness for the national songs of their country.

"Here, *czigány!*" said Géza Vécsery, a man of vast property in the county of Zemplén, of which he was Lord Lieutenant, "play me that favourite song of mine, '*Káka tövén költ a rucza!*' Play it so that you draw every tear from my eyes, and every florin from out my pockets."

And Binecz Markó began with tender tones on his instrument to bring forth the melancholy sounds of that sweetest of Hungarian songs.

While everybody talked as merrily as ever, Géza Vécsery had drawn a chair close to the *czigány* band, and, sitting astride upon it, with a half-empty bottle of wine in his hand, he gave himself over to the delights

of listening to his favourite tune, letting his head beat time to the quaint rhythm. For fully half an hour he sat there, forcing the *czigány* to repeat the same tune over and over again, while, to testify to his intense enjoyment, tears flowed thick and fast down his cheeks, for truly "*Strva vigad a Magyar!*" (The Hungarian weeps whilst he makes merry).

He evidently had quite forgotten the end of the dinner, for he took no further heed of anything round him, his enthusiasm seemed to grow at every repetition; his "*Ujra!*" (Encore!) waxed louder and more imperative.

"Slower!" he shrieked at times; at others "Faster!" or "Louder!" "Do not go to sleep, you lazy dog!" or "What has happened to that cursed fiddle of thine? It has no tone! Ah, I understand," he added, rising excitedly, "it is thirsty, it wants to drink, and this wine is a drink fit for angels; here, *czigány*, fiddle! drink! drink! it will revive you! drink, I say!"

And, not very steady on his feet, the Lord Lieutenant rose, and taking the fiddle out of the leader's hand, he laughingly poured the whole contents of the bottle he was holding into its body.

Nobody took much notice of his playful antics; the gipsy very calmly let him amuse himself with his fiddle; he well knew that good compensation would follow the destruction of the instrument.

"Try that now, *czigány*," said Géza Vécsery, handing the man his fiddle back; "I am sure it will play a great deal better for having drunk good Hungarian wine."

Unfortunately, however, the fiddle utterly refused to give forth any sound under the circumstances. The gipsy, with absolute stolidity, made one or two at-

tempts at scraping the catgut. The sounds which he drew from it amused the Lord Lieutenant hugely.

"Try again, *czigány!*" he roared. "Here, you don't know how to do it; let me show you!" and he pulled the instrument out of the man's hand. But this time, either his hand was more clumsy, or the swarthy musician turned the fiddle over on purpose, anyhow the inevitable catastrophe occurred, and the wine flowed out freely, and deluged the noble lord and the gipsy practically from head to foot.

"Ho! what waste of good wine!" said Vécsery, laughing. "Ah, well, it is an ungrateful fiddle. Here, *czigány*, you will want something to wipe its mouth dry!"

And he took several bank-notes out of his pocket, and stuffed them into the fiddle with as much delight as he had poured the wine into it previously; then he allowed the gipsy to have his instrument again. He had had enough fun for the present.

Moreover every one seemed to be rising to adjourn to different parts of the house for smoking or for strolling in the garden.

Feri had tried to remain close to Ilonka, but this was distinctly not proper, for all the young men were together smoking, while all the girls, like a veritable bevy of gay-plumaged, chattering birds, put their pretty heads together, and whispered of things which only have interest for those dainty bits of femininity.

That day was perhaps the happiest one two young people at any rate experienced. Ilonka, throwing all prudence to the wind, and wilfully defying mama's blackest looks, gave herself over to the delights of her day-dreams. As a child, playing with an absolutely novel and fascinating toy, quite unable to understand

that it is brittle, and only made for momentary pleasure, she coquetted and flirted with this pleasant emotion, which a handsome young officer's ardent words had kindled in her heart.

All day she dreamed of what she so little understood: of a man's passion, of marriage, and blissful life with one whom it was paradise even to listen to, when he whispered so often, and, oh! so ardently, "I love you, Ilonka!"

In the evening, during the long waits of the cotillon, during the cosy moments of supper, during the inspiring hour of the csárdá, Madách Feri was close to her. As he sat near her he could feel the dainty muslin frock against his knee and, trembling, his hand would seek the soft fabric and stroke it tenderly, or crush it nervously, as his passion grew stronger and stronger every moment, for this exquisite type of lovely girlhood.

And as innocently as a child she would return his ardent gaze, not comprehending what it was that brought a warm blush to her cheek and made her own little hand tremble and her heart palpitate. She felt as it were shut off from the gay world of those around her, walking through the figures of quadrille or cotillon, not heeding other hands she touched, other eyes she met, or listening to other words, save those few she had now heard so often, and yet which seemed to gather an infinity of sweetness, as they were repeated again and again: "I love you, Ilonka!"

Love! What did the child know of love — of the strength of the torrent she, with her own dainty hand, had unchained? She had known Madách Feri all her life; when, a veritable queen of four years old, she had lorded it over the handsome boy of some five years her senior, he had said, "I love you, Ilonka!" He had

said it then, he whispered it now, and as her heart had responded then, it re-echoed now, childlike, sweet, and innocent.

And the young man, though with more knowledge of the world, and a dim foreshadowing of the inevitable ending to this happy day-dream, gave himself over to the happiness of the moment. He could not say much to her, for there were too many there who might overhear the words so sweetly foolish, that love in its infancy babbles to one ear alone, but he could, from time to time, pick up her fan or handkerchief, and in handing them back to her feel for one instant her tiny finger against his hand. He could, when no one was looking, and all the mamas were intent in watching some intricate figure of the dance, lean forward and look for a brief moment right into those blue eyes which she had a playful habit of keeping irritatingly cast down.

All this and more, he could and did do, talking but a few most commonplace topics with her, forced to avoid what lay so near his heart, but gazing at her all the time, drinking in every line of that graceful girlish figure, the bit of white neck that peeped out slyly from out the soft folds of white muslin, the tiny pink ear, half veiled by stray golden curls, the heavy, drooping lashes, that cast a glowing shadow on the soft, peach-like cheeks.

Ah! she was divinely pretty, this dainty product of a rich fertile land, a bit of exquisite jewellery, set in a framework of semi-barbaric surroundings, and hemmed in by an impenetrable wall of conventionality, which had cramped her budding character, and was threatening to shape this perfect work of the Creator into one of the thoughtless, soulless dolls, that those of her kind

and breeding all gradually become: a pretty ornament to the great, hospitable castles of which they all ultimately become mistress: a respectful wife to their husbands—the head of the house: content to follow the traditions that have existed for hundreds of years: dressing perhaps a little differently to what their grandmothers, or great-grandmothers did, decking their dainty bodies with perhaps differently shaped garments: but allowing their minds, their souls, to remain on the self-same level, without any attempt at cultivating mental gifts, which they persist in looking on as bourgeois, and unworthy their long line of ancestry who had fought and made their country great without reading a book or writing a letter.

“I love you, Ilonka!” whispered the young man at every interval between the figures of the cotillon.

And Ilonka's ears were agreeably tickled by those tender and passionate words that, in her youth, her innocence, her warped education, she understood so little. How could a young girl understand? brought up, as she had been, kept away, till she was “out” from every society save that of her father and her mother, never reading a line that did not pass under the rigorous censorship of her mother's eyes, taught and shown nothing which might lead her to understand the depth of a human heart, the passions that fill a man's soul.

Poor little girl! what did she know of love? save that it was so pleasant to hear about it from this one being who danced the csárdás so divinely, and looked so handsome in his volunteer's uniform; she allowed herself and him to dream this day-dream, not accustomed to look at the future, accepting the present, which was so fair, never guessing that such dreams ever ended, and that there was such a thing as a world

which was not made up of muslin frocks, of cotillons, and handsome volunteer officers, where harsh words often took the place of softly whispered "I love you!" where reality with remorseless fingers scattered the poetic imaginings of young girls to the four winds, leaving them often sadder, sometimes hardened, always disillusioned, for no reality, however golden, can come up to those visions born in the brain of a girl of seventeen.

When every one had gone to bed, after hours of dancing, amusement, and excitement, to dream of more excitements, more amusements, more dancing, Ilonka well knew that her mother's entrance into her room at that unaccustomed hour meant a very serious lecture. She had the whole of the day thrown prudence to the winds, and, in spite of mama's black looks, and whispered comments of the older ladies, had singled out Madách Feri for her most special favours.

The Countess Irma had no intention of being unkind. In her inmost heart she firmly believed that she was devoted to her daughter, and only considered her happiness, when she tried to instil into her that love of birth and estates, in which she herself had been brought up. She so firmly believed that every description of misery would be the result of poverty or of a *mésalliance*, that she would have considered herself a most unnatural and culpable mother if she did not in good time draw a picture of those evils before Ilonka, in such a way as to make her shun the attentions of a "detrimental," and repulse them if they came her way.

"I came to tell you, Ilonka, that I was extremely displeased with you," she began drily.

"With me, mama?"

"Your conduct with that penniless Madách is positively indecent."

"Oh, mama!"

"Every one remarked on it to-night. I assure you I blushed for you the whole evening."

"Mama!"

Poor little girl! she was so appealing, so sorrowful; she felt a little guilty certainly, but she had had such a very enjoyable day. Two great tears were already trickling down her cheeks: mama always had the power of making her unhappy.

And "mama" embarked on the usual lecture: of how a young noble girl should behave, how she should never allow one young man more than another to pay any attention to her unless her parents have previously authorised her to do so; that conduct such as Ilonka's to-night was unmaidenly, and that, if it was not mended the next day, she would have to spend the rest of the time that the guests were in the house, in her own apartments, by herself.

"Mama" was exceedingly eloquent, and Ilonka very, very unhappy. When her mother finally left her, after half an hour's steady preaching on children's obedience and maidenly reserve, the poor little girl threw herself on the bed in a passionate flood of tears. Never in all her long, seventeen-year-old life had she been so unhappy. A most delicious bit of romance had come in that life, and caressed her young mind with poetic dreams, such as she hardly understood herself; stern reality, wearing "mama's" best silk gown, had, with be-ringed, aristocratic fingers, chased those day-dreams away. Hers was a child's grief who sees its most cherished toy taken away from it, without understanding the reason of the cruelty; but is there any-

thing in its way more pathetically hopeless than a child's grief? There seems such a total want of hope in it, for the child mind only understands the present, it cannot conceive that there may be a future, capable of alleviating its sorrows.

Ilonka cried till she fell asleep, and in her sleep she once more dreamed such dreams that made her forget the realities, her stern mama, the midnight lectures, and once more brought, floating before her mind, visions of a handsome young face, with a pair of dark eyes which, somehow, always made her blush when they met her own, and to her ear the softly whispered words, sweeter than song of birds or chorus of angels: "I love you, Ilonka!"

CHAPTER XI

THE GATHERING STORM

ONE of the busiest times on the Hungarian lowlands is this gathering in of the second harvest, which has to be done quickly before the early autumn rains set in, leaving plenty of margin for threshing before the vintage time commences. Every year at this time the fields round Kisfalu teem with work. The hundreds of labourers, employed by the rich Kemény András, have little time for gossip and rest, for the eye of the master is everywhere, and it is pleasure to work under it, since he has a cheery word, a merry jest for all, which is encouraging when the sun on the bare back burns to the bone, and the muscles ache with the wielding of the heavy scythes.

But, to-day, a curious look of general idleness seems to pervade the atmosphere, and to have settled on the rich peasant-farmer's fields, and he himself, riding from group to group, vainly tries, by encouragement or upbraiding, to keep his troop of mowers to the task. They stand about, their scythes lying idle at their feet, their pipes in their mouth, their gaze fixed on one particular point of the horizon the other side of the plain, where a column of black smoke obscures the soft-toned purple line of the sky. With arms, feet, and torso bare, their legs encased in the loose lawn trousers of their national attire, they quietly allow the burning

noonday sun to frizzle their backs, and smoke, gazing meditatively afar, or congregate in eager, excited groups to whisper whenever the master's back is turned.

"Hey! you lazy good-for-nothings," says András from time to time, "you need my late father's heavy stick on your shoulders this morning. Here, Rezső, take up your scythe. Miska, throw away that pipe directly. Come, all of you, and when I am back in half an hour, mind I see this field as level as the plain yonder, or I swear I will let some of you have a taste of my new knotted stick."

Shamefacedly a group of idlers break up, thoughtfully one or two take up their scythes and draw them slowly aslant the waving corn.

"It is useless, András," says one of them, with sudden resolution, as he once more throws his scythe down. "How can we toil on God's earth with our two hands while the devil is at work not four leagues away?"

"Hey!" says András, cheerily, "if my lord has engaged the devil to work for him, that is no reason why you should allow my corn to go to hell for want of active cutting."

"Why, you know well, András, that we will all work for you till our backs break, if need be, but, somehow, to-day, it is impossible. How do we know," added the peasant, surlily, "that next year you will not also let us starve and employ the devil to do the work for you?"

"That's well spoken, Rezső," said another, a young athlete, with muscular arms and broad chest, that shone in the sun like dull ivory turned brown with age.

"Yes, there's not much use toiling on the dear lowlands, now, since the devil is to do the reaping; next year I suppose he will do the sowing too, and we can all lie down and wait till starvation overtakes us."

"It is time the Tarna came and flooded us all, before the devil takes possession of our souls."

"Tut! tut! tut!" says András, impatiently, "what have we, at Kisfalú, to do with the devil of Bideskút? I think my lord is a fool with his machinery, but I think you are all fools to trouble your heads about him; ay, and knaves too if you steal my day, and do nothing for the wage I give you."

"It is all very well, András, but you cannot employ every able-bodied man this side of the Tarna. I wish you could, for then my brother would not have to work for the lord of Bideskút, which he does, in fear and trembling, lest the devil should make a pick-a-back of him, every time he stoops down to mow."

"Yes, and there are both my younger brothers, driving those devilish contrivances, that reap and bind the corn all by the turn of a wheel. The younger one, Laczi, told me," added the peasant in an awed whisper, "that he distinctly saw a black man with a tail and long pointed ears, sitting between the horns of one of the oxen, that was, poor innocent thing, dragging the cursed machine. I tell you Laczi nearly fell off his seat with fright."

"With having had a draught too much of that wine your mother gave him before he started work in the morning," said András, trying to laugh. But his laughter was forced and unnatural. All Pater Ambrosius's teaching had not quite wiped the superstitions of his kind out of his head, and though he forced himself not to look that way, his eyes also instinctively

wandered across his cheery fields and beyond the sandy plain to that column of black smoke that he knew proceeded from the lord of Bideskút's new building.

He had heard from Rosenstein that all the machinery necessary for converting wheat into flour by the help of steam was fixed ready inside the mill, and that my lord intended to begin work this day. Of course, Pater Ambrosius had thoroughly explained to him the uses and powers of steam, but Kemény András, in spite of his riches and in spite of these teachings, was still the peasant at heart, and he could not help shuddering and looking behind him anxiously every time he caught sight of the clouds of smoke which made an ugly blot on the vast horizon, that he had learned to love and regard as his own. He was evidently at a loss how to quiet his workmen's fears, since he was not very free from them himself. An anxious crowd had gathered round the master, all eager to gain some sort of comfort from him, for next to Pater Ambrosius, no one, not even my lord, was thought to possess as much learning as András; young men and old crowded round him, eager, excited, glad of a chance to pour forth their anxiety into their master's ever-sympathising ears. Each had a tale to tell him of father, brother, or son, who during the long hours of labour close to the mysterious building (which surely was a place of worship dedicated to the devil) had in some guise or other felt the presence of the Evil One, who now walked up and down the main road and called in at farm and inn, since my lord had invited him to earth. The women too had given up their work of binding, and they also had many a tale to tell. Angrily they stamped their tiny brown feet on the earth and shook their fists at the

distant column of smoke, which was the first sacrifice offered to Satan on the beautiful lowlands. In gaily coloured cotton petticoats, and full embroidered lawn shifts, their slim waists held in by a tight-fitting corslet, their heads protected from the burning sun by a red or yellow kerchief tied in a becoming knot over the brow, they looked a very picturesque set of angry furies, enough surely to frighten the most enterprising devil from the neighbourhood. András felt that it was useless now to talk about work again.

"Erzsi, my pretty one," he said merrily, "if you throw such burning looks across to Bideskút, you will surely bring the devil straightway here; he will think it is a spark from his own furnace."

"Hey! leave me alone, with your jests to-day, András, my father is at work in that very mill of Satan. My lord offered high wages for the work, and threatened not to employ him at all this harvest time if he refused to do it; so he went to confession and communion this morning, and the Pater gave him a whole litre of holy water. But I tell you, my mother cried fit to break her heart when he started to the godless work, and I do not think somehow that I shall ever see him again. Oh! why does not the devil take my lord away since he is so fond of his company?" and pretty Erzsi shook a menacing fist at the distant cloud of smoke.

"My son Imre has to do some work too, right inside the building," said an older woman, in a voice choked with sobs; "I declare if any harm comes to him, I will——"

"Hush! hush! hush!" said András, "don't let me hear that sort of language round Kisfalu. The lord of Bideskút is your master, you must work for him as he

commands. The devil can have no power over you if you do your duty."

"It is not duty to serve one who is in league with the devil," asserted Erzsi, hotly.

"No! that 's right!" murmured some of the crowd.

"I will not let Laczi work for him again," said one of the men.

"He has no right to give over our souls to the devil," said another.

"I believe he has promised the devil so many souls in exchange for the work the Evil One does for him," suggested an old wrinkled woman, whose sons were all employed at Bideskút.

"And we do not know which of us may be carried off next."

"It is a shame."

"The lord of Bideskút will repent it," came in what now had become threatening accents.

This handful of easy-going, somewhat lazy, always merry peasantry were gradually working themselves up to a state of hysterical excitement, caused by superstitious fear; and they absolutely refused to listen to András. He was doing his utmost to pacify the women, who made matters infinitely worse by sobbing and moaning, and calling on God to punish the miscreant who had brought the enemy of mankind to this beloved land of peace and plenty.

Suddenly a loud shriek from one of the women made all heads turn in the direction to which she was pointing, with long gaunt arm stretched out, and shaking like poplar leaves in the wind.

"Look! look!" she cried with trembling lips, "the fires from hell! Miska! Andor! Ivan, my sons! they will be buried in the flames the Evil One has kindled!

Help! help! I see them perishing before my eyes! Curse the lord of Bideskút! the fury of the devil is upon us!"

All looked horror-struck, trembling at the distant column of smoke, through which from time to time a shower of sparks appeared; these looked to the poor ignorant folk as the very fires from below, in which they and their families were about to be annihilated.

The women threw their arms up in the air, yelling out curses on the head of him who had brought this evil in the land. Some had thrown themselves on the ground, and burying their faces between their knees, moaned and sobbed, while rocking their bodies to and fro, in an agony of grief. The men raised menacing fists at the distance, and cursed between their teeth, though no less bitterly.

András was for once in his life quite at a loss for pleasant words or merry laugh with which to cheer up his labourers, whom he loved as his friends and equals, into whose feelings and thoughts he always knew so well how to enter, since he was one of them, placed in nowise above them through his wealth. It almost broke his heart to see his sturdy lads standing defiant, idle, and cursing, so different to the usual, merry light-heartedness with which they invariably worked for him, and which is the essence of the Hungarian character. He had neither the learning, the eloquence, nor the conviction of Pater Ambrosius, which perhaps might have quieted these superstitious terrors, he had only a great fondness for his fellow-men, and this he exerted heartily, and with many a: "Now then, Panna, my soul! don't take it to heart," and "Erzsi, my pretty one, your father is quite safe. Come! come! take my word for it, no harm will come to any one. I

do not understand the cursed things: but believe me the devil has nothing to do with the making of them! . . . Why; you all must remember the workmen coming from Budapesth to put up the machinery. They surely did not look like devils. It is all right . . . you will soon get used to seeing many things done by machinery, which you used to do with your hands. They are harmless enough, I know, and if the lord of Bideskút does not give you all enough wage to last you through the winter, why I can always find work for those extra hands who do not want to remain idle. Now then, all of you, look me straight in the face, instead of at that black smoke which is far away. Will you do your duty by me, and go back to your work? It is the best way I assure you to keep the devil from your doors."

There was a long silence, while Kemény András stood between them, his merry brown eyes gleaming, forcing each head, as by the magnetic current of his own kind heart, to turn towards those frank eyes of his so full of sympathy.

"We will try, András," said one or two of the men, while the women began to wipe away their tears and to bend once more to their work.

The groups gradually dispersed and found their way back to their task, whilst András, with a sigh and a shake of the head, mounted his mare and rode off to some farther field, where he found the same idle groups of men and women, the same superstitious terror, the same menacing attitude. Till close upon noon he rode hither and thither, in spite of the fact that as the sun rose higher over his head he could less and less shake off a feeling of dark presentiment which against his better judgment gradually filled his mind; until at last

he found that instead of upbraiding and cheering the superstitious or the discontented he was listening with awe and in silence to the various tales of terror or of evil his own workpeople were never weary to relate. Tired, enervated, and anxious, he rode home at mid-day for his meal. The farmhouse of Kisfalu was now exceedingly homelike and comfortable. András had built an outhouse to which he had relegated kitchen and wash-house, whilst the main little building, with a picturesque veranda running round it covered with sweet-scented honeysuckle and jessamine, was kept entirely for living-rooms. The big sitting-room cut the house as it were in half, from the front door, which opened on to the veranda, to the two windows opposite, which looked out on the immeasurable puszta beyond. From it right and left opened four rooms, two at each side, which were the bedrooms, those on the left being newly built, and beautifully papered and painted.

As András entered, the room was half in darkness, the rays of the sun being well-tempered by cool-looking green shutters. Close to the window, getting the only ray of daylight necessary for her work, sat old Kemény Etelka at her spinning. Drowsily in the noonday heat her bare feet turned the wheel, while in low, soft tones she hummed to herself snatches of melancholy Hungarian songs.

There was no beauty about the rugged face now; whatever charm of freshness it may have possessed in youth was obliterated during the long years of patient slavery Etelka had undergone beneath the dreary roof of her miserly lord. There were deep lines of humiliations and sufferings patiently endured round the drooping mouth, and the eyes looked dull and lustreless from many shed and unshed tears. But at the sound of her

son's heavy tread on the veranda the old face became radiant with a happy smile, and seemed suddenly transfigured: the eyes sparkled and the white teeth that peeped between the shrivelled lips gave quite a renewed look of youth to the melancholy face.

"*Isten hozta!* [God has brought you] my son," she said, "you are earlier than I expected. Sári, Katinka," she called loudly, "bring the *gulyás* [stew] at once, the master is home."

András had entered very dejectedly; he threw his hat on one side, then having kissed his mother:

"I can do nothing with the fellows, mother, to-day. They seem unable to work; hardly is my back turned when all eyes stare straight across the puszta to where a column of black smoke reminds them of that accursed steam-mill. I am thankful you have closed the shutters so that I can see nothing more of that invention of the devil."

"I am glad to hear you call it so, my son," said Etelka with a sigh; "you know what I used to tell you about it when first Rosenstein said that my lord was going to grind his corn with the help of fire and smoke."

"Mother, dear, you are a saint, and as I am sure you must have been in heaven some time or other in your life you must have learned there that the devil does not trouble himself much about our concerns."

"Ay! but my son, how can you talk like that? Pater Ambrosius himself says the devil walks about the earth trying to tempt souls to be wicked and to go to hell."

"Yes, mother, but he does not get into engines and drive them; the steam does that. I have read about it in books. I do not understand the things, and I do not

think I want to; I am sure my flour last year fetched a higher price than any in the country, and if it is every year as fine and white as last I shall never want to better my farming."

"And in the meanwhile, András, it is terrible to think that my lord's folly drags so many of our dear friends at Bideskút into the clutches of Satan."

András was about to reply, when his mother placed a warning finger on her mouth. The two pretty peasant girls came in who did Ėtelka's household work, two little orphan girls who had lost their father and mother a few years back in the last cholera epidemic, and whom Ėtelka had brought to Kísfalu, and taught to cook, to wash, and to spin. They were bringing in the steaming *gulyás* (stew), the roasted potatoes, and baskets of melons and peaches for dinner, carrying the heavy dishes on their small heads, and supporting them with one graceful curved arm, while the other was placed akimbo on the hip.

András jumped up merrily.

"Eh! mother dear, there is nothing like a good dish of *gulyás* to make one forget one's troubles; here Sári, my pretty one, give me a kiss and the biggest jug you have in your kitchen so that I may go and draw the wine; we shall all want plenty to drink, for it is hot out in the fields, I can tell you."

While András went to draw the wine in the brick cellar which he had built on the shady side of the house, Sári and Kati spread the substantial fare; on the oak table, polished till it shone like a mirror, they had placed the savoury stew, the potatoes, and fruit. At the head of the table came the mistress's arm-chair and next to it the master's. They themselves had their

The Gathering Storm

III

places at the bottom of the table. While waiting for her son, Etelka had distributed the *gulyás* in heavy glazed earthenware plates, and as soon as András came back with the jug in his hand, all fell to with spoon and knife, while the master poured the wine out in mugs for everybody.

But the meal was not as merry as usual. Both Etelka and András were anxious and silent, and the two little maids dared not chatter. They felt awed and sad, for they had never seen the master so quiet. One of them dropped a few tears in her plate; she thought something dreadful must have happened.

When each had finished her mug of wine and, Etelka having risen, the plates and dishes were removed, András was able to speak on the subject that was so near to his heart.

"Mother, I have been thinking the last half-hour, while eating the *gulyás*, that I am very lazy and good-for-nothing not to try and see whether I cannot even at this last moment persuade my lord to give up his obstinate ideas about that cursed mill. I cannot help thinking Rosenstein must have been only half-hearted when he told my lord for me of all the evils which I know will come if he will go on irritating the peasants with those new-fangled notions of his."

"Rosenstein declared that my lord would not listen to any talk. He has set his heart on those cursed mills."

She had resumed her spinning, and the drone of the wheel made a gentle accompaniment to their talk. András felt enervated, still vaguely anxious; he was walking up and down the long narrow room, and every now and then, impatiently, he pushed aside the shutters and gazed with a deep frown between his brows at the

cloud of black smoke which still rose out there, far ahead.

"I wonder if Pater Ambrosius ever spoke about it to my lord?" he mused aloud.

"The kind Pater would not dare say much, for fear of irritating my lord against him, and then he would have to leave his church of Árokszállás where he has been over forty years. This would break his heart. No! no!" added the old woman, "the Pater would not dare speak."

"Well, then, mother, I will dare," said András resolutely. "It is not too late, and I am sure I shall find the right words in my heart with which to persuade my lord of all the unhappiness his folly is causing, all the anxiety and the fright. He must be a kind man, he will listen to me. After all," he added, throwing his head back and standing very erect, "I employ as many hands as he does; I have lent him enough money to give me the right to speak to him, if I want to. I can buy his whole cursed mill from him and then destroy it if I choose, and I would do it whatever price he may ask for it sooner than see all the men surly and defiant, and hear the women cry as I did to-day. Give me your blessing, mother; I will ride to Bideskút at once. It is not too late yet to drive the devil to the other side of the Tarna."

"God bless you, my son," said Etelka, but she shook her head. "The lord of Bideskút is a proud man, he will not listen to a peasant," she urged.

"A peasant! who could buy every foot of land he owns even after he had lent him the purchase money twice over already," retorted András proudly. "Mother, do not discourage me. The lord of Bideskút owes me much; he must be grateful, if he is a man, for the loan

of my money, which he has almost got as a gift, and which keeps him out of the clutches of the Jews. He must render me service for service and sell me his fad, so that I may destroy it. Send word round to the fields that the men can go quietly back to work. To-morrow we will begin to pull down that mill of the devil, and send the machinery back to hell." He was quite happy now and his mother heard him singing all the way to the stables, and talk merry nonsense to his mare as he stroked her sleek neck, and whispered to her whither he meant to take her. Two minutes after that Etelka, having raised the shutters, looked out on to the plains as her handsome son galloped past, swinging his hat in wild delight. She watched him until he and his mare were but a mere speck on the blue horizon, then she again shook her head, but there was a proud look on her face, and a tear of joy in her eye as she once more settled down to her spinning.

CHAPTER XII

LORD AND PEASANT

ANDRÁS rode gaily and full of hope across the desolate puszta, his mind busy in arranging the best plan with which to overthrow my lord's resistance, should he prove obstinate in the nursing of his folly. The peasant never for a moment supposed that the lord of Bideskút would not immediately see in their right light all the evils which were gathering over his head, and all the sorrows and haunting terrors his unnecessary fads were causing among those who were to a great extent dependent upon their lord for wage. He had left his own fields behind and to the left, and his mare galloped across the plain, throwing clouds of dust round her as her hoofs fell on the sandy soil. The sun shone glaring overhead. The heat was intense, but András felt neither dust nor glare of sun; his eyes were riveted on that distant column of smoke, which he hoped to smother by the strength of his will, exerted to its fullest extent on behalf of his fellow-workers, his servant comrades. Of the lord of Bideskút he knew nothing. When years ago he decided to place the vast wealth his father had left him at small interest with my lord, a certain shyness, born of long suppression and loneliness, had induced him to employ the Jew Rosenstein as an intermediary; and as years went on and the transaction continued, the inborn hatred of every Hungarian

peasant for all money-lending business had kept him away from the aristocratic borrower. He longed to buy Kisfalu. This was his dream. He was willing enough to pay double or treble its value for the happiness of owning that beloved land. But Rosenstein, who made a usurious profit out of trafficking with András's money, kept lord and peasant apart; neither knew how willing the other would have been to conclude the transaction once for all. The interest, paid in kind, Rosenstein collected for, and subsequently bought from, Kemény. The rents of Kisfalu András paid entirely in money, and the noble lord, always in want of cash, sent his bailiff every quarter-day for the gold. Thus the game of hide-and-seek went on, in which Rosenstein was the only winner, the other two merely dupes. András, however, firmly believed that though Bideskúty had repeatedly refused to sell Kisfalu to a peasant, yet a feeling of gratitude must exist in his heart towards that same peasant who was willing to keep him out of the Jews' clutches by exacting but a nominal interest for his money. On that feeling of gratitude András meant to rely when formulating his request: he was willing enough to part with more money if he could buy and destroy what caused so much sorrow in the village and on the fields.

Bideskút lay the other side of the wide plain, and to reach the big house, András had to gallop many miles through the lord of Bideskut's property. Here, as in Kisfalu, the work in the fields was idle; András could see small groups of labourers talking excitedly and pointing with menacing fists towards the steam-mill close by on the left. He would not stop to speak to them, though many hailed him with a shout. He was sick at heart with these terrors he could not alleviate.

He kept to the main road, down the alley of poplars, which threw narrow, gaunt shadows across, that looked like long arms stretched menacingly towards the mill. It was still emitting volumes of smoke through its tall chimney, and András was glad that it lay well to the left, away from the main road, and that he was not obliged to lead Csillag past the dreaded building.

He wished to keep his spirits up, and talked gaily to the mare. A group of a dozen labourers barred the way ahead, in front.

"Hey! friend András! whither so quickly?" they shouted from afar. András, perforce, had to slacken the mare's speed.

"Let me pass," he said cheerily, "I am on my way to Bideskút."

"Do not go there, András, the devil is at work!"

"It is to drive the devil away that I am going."

"You cannot do it; go back."

And they all stood in a ring round horse and rider, so that András perforce had to stand.

"Do you see those stacks, András?" said one of the men; "that wheat is to be threshed and ground into flour, all within a day, and never the hand of thresher or miller is to touch it."

It was the eternal story told with blanched cheeks and quivering lips. Oh! for wings with which to fly to Bideskút and stop this worship of devil's work before it be too late.

"Let me pass, Miska," said András cheerily, "we will stop the devil and his work."

"How will you do it, friend?"

"That is my secret; let me pass."

"You can do nothing; and if harm comes to you, there will be nobody to look after us in winter, now

that my lord employs no labour and lets Satan do his work."

"Hey! leave me alone about Satan," said András, impatiently. "Leave Csillag alone, or she will rear. I tell you I am going to stop the devil and his work. I give you my word no wheat shall be ground inside that mill."

"Your word?"

"Yes, my word! There! let Csillag go! God be with you all."

The men obediently stood aside, and with a merry farewell he galloped off down the road towards the great gates of Bideskút. The peasants turned awhile to look after him; some shook their heads, but all murmured, "God be with you, András."

At the gates András brought the mare to a standstill. He had never ridden up the majestic acacia drive, and a certain feeling of awe, born of centuries of peasant submission to their lord, made him dismount and start to walk up towards the house. Csillag remained outside, waiting patiently for her master, as safe from thieves' hands as she would be in her own stables. No one could have mounted her against her will except her master. She looked about for a shady spot, and there she retired, content to wait till he came back.

András followed the long sweet-scented alley; from afar he could hear the sounds of gaiety within the castle, loud peals of boisterous laughter, and lively *czigány* music, shouts of "*Éljen!*" and the clinking of knives and forks against the china. The long-taught deference of the peasant for the noble induced him to avoid the main entrance and noble staircase. He turned towards the left side of the building from which proceeded laughter of no less boisterous kind, together

with delicious scents of roast meats and fragrant fruit.

András pushed open the wide double doors and found himself in the vast kitchen, where two days before Rosenstein the Jew had been made to break the laws of his religion in order to gratify the whim of a spendthrift lord.

As merry as ever, but busy beyond description, the cooks, kitchen-maids, and scullions filled the vast kitchen with laughter, chatter, and animation. A universal shout of astonishment, but of real joy, greeted András as he entered.

"God has brought you, András!" shouted Benkó, the portly cook. "Here Zsuzsi, bring a chair, quick! No, not that one! the big arm-chair! Panna, wipe the table, quickly! Miska, bring that fine piece of lamb! Friend András, you will surely honour it by tasting it!"

And young kitchen-maids and scullions busied themselves round the unexpected guest. He was a stranger to these walls, but not indeed to any of their inmates. Every peasant in the county knew him, loved him, owed him gratitude for some kindness or other, whether he were labourer or servant, man or maid.

"Thank ye! Thank ye, all!" said András, putting up his hand, to parry some of the more boisterous welcomes. "I have not come to eat my lord's meat in his kitchen, though all of you are welcome to eat mine at my mother's table. To-day I have come to speak with my lord."

"Ah! but I do not think you can do that," said fat Benkó, the cook. "My lord has company, nearly two hundred barons and baronesses, counts and countesses are dining up there in the great hall. Hey! if you

could only taste some of the delicious things I have dished up for the midday meal!" he sighed with professional pride.

"But my lord cannot stay all day at his meal, and what I have to say to him is of the greatest importance."

"If you will wait," said Benkó, scratching his head, thoughtfully, "till Jankó comes down, he can whisper in my lord's ear that you would speak with him, and then, perhaps—. And here is Jankó," he added, as that worthy appeared at the door, "Jankó, come here, this is Kemény András of Kisfalu. Bow to him, Jankó, as you would to my lord. . . . And now listen, Jankó, András wishes to speak to my lord."

"His lordship does not like being interrupted at dinner," said Jankó, thoughtfully scratching his head.

"Look here," says András impatiently, "you are all very good and kind fellows, but there is a little too much talking. I am in a hurry. Go up, Jankó, there's a good man, and whisper in my lord's ear that Kemény András, from Kisfalu, wishes to speak with him at once."

"He will reply," said Jankó meekly, "that Kemény András may go to the devil."

"No! he will not say that, Jankó," said András, quietly; "but if he does, tell him that it is a matter which may cost him very dearly, if he does not hear it in good time."

It was a curious thing that every one always did exactly what Kemény András wanted. There was a great deal of familiarity between him and every peasant for leagues around. His wealth he did not in any way consider as having placed him above his equals, but he had learned to command, because his will was strong and self-centred, and having in his early youth learned

implicit obedience he knew how to enforce it, now that he was his own master. Jankó went off shaking his head dubiously.

Silence had fallen on the inmates of the kitchen. Perhaps they felt that they had been a little too familiar with the rich farmer who came to speak with my lord. Panna shyly had dusted the big arm-chair, and stood irresolute as to whether she should draw it near the table. Benkó had sent the scullions flying in every direction, and had respectfully placed a bottle of wine and a glass on the table.

"Won't you honour us all, András, by drinking this wine?"

"Hey! with the greatest pleasure, Benkó, my good fellow! If it was your wine, I tell you I should drink that bottle full, and ask for more. But till I know if his lordship is friend or foe, I will not drink his wine. Panna my soul, give up dusting that chair, it is almost as smoothly polished as your own pretty cheeks. No! I will not drink the wine of Bideskút, but I tell you what! I will kiss all its pretty girls."

And laughing Kemény András took each pretty kitchen-maid by the waist and since they did not struggle very hard, he soon had made each one as pink as a peony. This restored merriment all round. Kemény András was not proud! Long live Kemény András! When Jankó came back with the astonishing announcement that my lord would see Kemény András in his smoking-room, he found the latter sitting, all smiles, in the big arm-chair, with a dozen pretty faces beaming at him from every side of the kitchen.

To reach my lord's smoking-room Jankó had to lead András up the great staircase and across one end of the main hall, where the noble lord of Bideskút was exer-

cising his boundless hospitality towards his aristocratic guests. András as he hurried through behind the *czigány*, so as to pass unperceived, caught a sudden fitful vision of bright-coloured dresses, pretty faces, and gay uniforms that reminded him of the tangled bit of garden where roses and lilies grew wild, and which his mother tended, outside the house at Kisfalu.

Jankó left him alone in the smoking-room, and Kemény András looked round him, astonished at what seemed to him visions of beauty and luxury of which he had never dreamed. He thought of his own little low-roofed sitting-room, where his mother sat spinning all the day, so different to this place, which, simple as it was, surpassed any ideas he may ever have had of gorgeousness and elegance.

How long he stood waiting, planted there where Jankó had left him, he could not have said. Dreamily he gazed out on to the park with its standard rose trees and many-coloured glass balls, which glittered in the sun, and his ears were agreeably tickled by the merry peals of laughter from the big hall; one or two high silvery tones struck him now and then as the prettiest tune he had ever heard. He looked at all this luxury, and wondered how a man could wilfully risk losing all that, for the sake of a cursed fad, how he could risk being forced to leave this gorgeous house, those rose-bushes, and the sight of those gaily-decked butterflies, who laughed so merrily in the great hall. Any man owning all these things, calling the land on which he stood his, was a fool to jeopardise an inch of it for the sake of a wicked caprice. . . .

The opening and shutting of a door, and a very stiff :

“ God has brought you,” interrupted András’s medi-

tations, and forced him to turn round to where stood the lord of Bideskút. He saw a merry, kindly face, a little haughty perhaps, but still—. András gazed ruefully at his own peasant attire, his hard brown hands, his leather belt, and shirt-sleeves, and understood how my lord would feel that there was, in spite of money affairs, still a wide difference between them.

"Well, what is it?" asked Bideskúty Gyuri, as he sat down and took one of his long pipes from the rack. He did not ask András to sit or to smoke, and while he filled his pipe he looked with a great deal of curiosity at the handsome young peasant whose riches were reported to be fabulous. Though he had often seen him in the village or in the fields he never had had an opportunity of standing face to face with him, or of talking to him.

András had lost any latent shyness. He had frowned a little when he saw that my lord sat down and left him to stand like one of his servants. However, he knew that he must be patient if he wished to be listened to at all, and quite quietly he drew a chair towards him, and also sat down.

"What I have to say," he began resolutely, "will not take long. I know your lordship is kept very much in ignorance of many things that happen on your property."

"Surely you have not come all the way from Kisfalu to tell me of those things which I do not know?" laughed Bideskúty.

"I beg pardon, most noble lord," said András. "It would save time if your lordship would let me tell you my errand without interrupting me. One of the things your lordship does not know is, that there is at the present moment terrible dissatisfaction for leagues

around in the village and on the fields. The peasantry are frightened. They do not understand things very clearly, and nobody has been at much pains to explain anything to them. To-day they are in a very dejected, terror-stricken mood, to-morrow, who knows? they might get infuriated, and it is not good to irritate a lowland peasant too far. He is like the puszta, smooth and at peace as a calm lake; but once let the winds from heaven stir it up, and banks of sand which were harmless enough rise like columns towards the sky, and woe betide then, if anything happen to stand in its way. Higher and higher the sand will rise, lashed by the fury of the wind, and when it can rise no more, it will sink crashing to the ground, burying beneath it all human life that has tried to stand up and oppose it in its wrath."

"You talk like a book, my friend," said my lord, smiling, and puffing away at his pipe, "but you talked of saving time, and I do not yet know the purpose of your errand."

"I have come to plead for the poor, the ignorant, on your lordship's estate. There are hundreds there who for generations have worked God's bountiful earth for you and your forefathers, sowing and reaping, threshing and grinding the fine corn and flour, which is famed throughout the world. They have toiled and you have earned; but they are content; they want to go on serving you, my lord; they are willing to take wage from you, and remain poor but free from want, almost slaves but happy on our beautiful lowland, on which God has sent a special blessing."

"That is very good of them, I am sure, my friend, and I certainly have no intention of getting labourers to work for me from a neighbouring county. I shall

not want as many hands at the mills, as I did, for, I am thankful to say, my steam-mill is ready, and——”

“Forgive me, my lord, if I interrupt. It is that mill which is causing so much trouble. Remember, we are not all so clever as your lordship; we do not understand all the means by which fire and iron can be made to do the work of our hands. It has raised great fears in the minds of the women, the men themselves, though they will not admit their terror, curse under their breath the contrivance which will take the bread out of their mouth for want of sufficient wage.”

“But, my good man, I have spent thousands on that mill. Surely you are not fool enough to suppose that I am going to give up the work of years, because a lot of superstitious old women have talked you all into some devilish nonsense.”

“No, not because of that,” said András, earnestly, “I do not think your lordship will give up all that work for the sake of some nonsense. But I do firmly believe that you will do it in order to save all the poor people on your estate from further sorrow and anxiety.”

“My worthy fellow, I have said before you talk like a book. But there is much nonsense written in books sometimes. Did you not hear me say, that my steam-mill, which you all will presently be grateful for on your knees, has cost me a quarter of a million?—do you think I am likely to throw that money away?”

“No, your lordship need not do that,” said András, eagerly; “the mill has cost a quarter of a million? well, I will buy it from you if you will name what money you like; three, four hundred thousand florins.”

“Oh! that’s it, is it?” said Bideskúty sarcastically, “you take me for a bigger fool than yourself, my friend. You want to buy the mill, do you? and work it at your

own profit! Oho! not a bad idea! and this pretty story of anxious mothers, infuriated peasants, and storms on the puszta, was very clever no doubt. But remain assured, my friend, the mill is not for sale."

"Your lordship thinks it sport to laugh at a peasant," said András, imperturbably, "but your honour is deceived: I offer to buy the mill, and when you have agreed to sell it I will destroy it."

"Destroy the mill!"

"Ay! all my labourers, who now stand about idly letting the corn fall to earth for want of mowing, will only be too happy to dig their pickaxes into the hated building, and my quarter of a million will have been well spent in seeing them all cheerfully at work again."

"But man, are you made of money?" gasped Bideskúty, forgetting for a moment the point at issue in his admiration for the wealth that was unconsciously flaunted before him.

"My father saved all his life: he was a clever worker, and he left me plenty," said András, proudly; "your lordship knows that I have enough."

"How should I know? I hear many rumours, and you live in that tumble-down old farm at Kisfalu."

"My mother loves the house, since I was born there, and I love it, because she dwells in it. I do not have a hundred guests at my table, but I would spend all the money I have to see the county of Heves beaming with smiles."

"Insolence!" said Bideskúty, frowning, "are you trying to preach to me?"

"Forgive me, my lord, I have no wish to be presumptuous. See! I have brought money with me. Plenty of it," he added, tapping his ponderous leather

belt; "will your lordship name the price, and let me bury my pickaxe in the very top of that tall chimney?"

"I tell you, fellow, you are a fool. Ay! and a knave, trying to trick me to further your own ends; I tell you if any one is to make money out of that mill, I will. I will not sell it, not if you were to lay out this floor with your Jewish gold, which you had better use for other Jewish tricks. For this one I am too sharp for you."

"Most noble lord! you do not understand! Oh, God! teach me how to explain to him. The peasants are enraged. They will do themselves or you some terrible injury. Your honour! remember for God's sake your own mother, your wife. The peasants think the devil drives the machinery, they are in terror now, they will be furious presently, and great, great harm will come of it."

"What harm comes of it will be of your own making, impudent peasant!" said Bideskúty, enraged, rising to his feet. "Come now, I have had enough of this. Get out of my house, I tell you! I will not sell my mill. Is that enough?"

András had become very pale; he too had risen to his feet, and he buried his finger-nails in his palms, to force himself, by sheer physical pain, not to retort with angry words, but for the sake of his friends and comrades to try, by patient and moderate talk, to break this man's obstinacy.

"My lord! in God's name listen. The poor fellows are all standing about in the fields, the women whose sons, fathers, brothers are employed on the mill are terrified of the evil that will come to them; they moan and sob fit to break a strong man's heart. If by any chance—such things do happen—any accident should occur to one of them, oh, then think! how will you

pacify them? Infuriated, they will look upon you as a murderer. They love me, they listen to me; though I am rich, I have remained one of them, but even I could not stop them from turning their wrath against you. Remember you have wife and child, they might come to harm; you never know where an ignorant man or woman's revenge will stop."

"And I tell you, insolent peasant, that if harm comes to me or mine, that your own hands will have guided the blow, your lying tongue incited the deed. I can read through your low, miserly peasant nature, ready for any lie to gain your own ends——"

"Hold on, your honour," said András, still containing himself; "I came here in all deference, with patience and kindness. For the sake of my comrades I would bear much, but your lordship is forgetting your own dignity and mine. I have in all money transactions dealt liberally and squarely with you, and——"

"You have paid your rents punctually, for I should turn you out of the farm pretty soon if you did not."

"But that is not all."

"How do you mean not all? What not all?"

"Your lordship seems ready to forget that the insolent peasant's purse has kept you out of the clutches of the Jews for the past five years."

"Your purse? Are you in league with that blood-sucking Rosenstein then?"

"Your lordship surely knows that the money you spend so freely originally came out of my purse—the papers——"

"Hey! what do I care about papers! How could I guess that for once in a lifetime the Jew's tale of some

other person who lends the money happened to be true? Well, what matter? Your beastly Jewish usury does not give you the right to interfere with my concerns, I pay you your interest, don't I?"

Bideskúty was beside himself with fury. His otherwise good-looking face was distorted with passion. András was still apparently calm, though very pale, the veins on his forehead swollen like cords. He tried to remain patient with this raving lunatic, forcing himself to think that in his hands rested the hopes of the poor fellows out there in the fields who were still watching the clouds of black smoke darkening the horizon of their beloved plains.

"Your honour is trying to misunderstand," he said quietly; "it is not my place, I own, to interfere in your lordship's affairs. I do not wish to interfere. I came here with a fair offer, because for the past month I have seen the dissatisfaction, the terrors of your peasantry grow, as you placed brick upon brick of that unfortunate structure. I did not expect your lordship to waste all the money you have spent upon it, therefore I came with a fair offer to buy the building and machinery so as to have the right to destroy it. If your lordship suspects my honesty, I am willing to leave the money here, if you will give me your word of honour that the mill shall be pulled down."

And András drew from his belt a heavy bag which jingled with the sound of gold and notes, and placed it on the table.

"Ay!" roared Bideskúty, losing the last lingering vestige of self-control, for the attack on his beloved fad had exasperated him beyond measure, "Ay! you want to lend me more of your accursed money, do you? to enrich yourself more and more at my expense, to ex-

tract more and more blood from me. I looked down upon you as an impudent, low-born peasant before, son or grandson of a liberated serf, whose female kind, a generation or two ago had to pay toll with their bodies to their lord before their husbands could claim them as their own. But now, Kemény András, you, by your own words have shown yourself to be but a dirty Jew out of the gutter. I have heard that you all descend from some bastard born of a Jewish waif. Ay! I see you in your true light. There! take back your money, I have no need of it; it would sully my valet's hand if he should happen to touch it."

And with his eyes aglow with rage, cheeks purple, lips quivering, the lord of Bideskút picked up the heavy bag of gold, and threw it violently in Kemény András's face.

The proud peasant, who had stood Bideskúty's insults up to the last moment, with the determination not to yield an inch, and not to leave the house till he had succeeded in his mission, turned absolutely livid. The heavy bag had grazed his forehead, leaving an ugly red mark across it, from which two or three drops of blood began slowly to trickle. For a moment the blow had stunned him, but the next he had turned on Bideskúty as some caged lion suddenly let free, his cheeks were deathly pale, but his eyes literally blazed with pent-up rage, and his muscular arm was lifted high, menacing above, ready to chastise his arrogant lord for every insult uttered, ready to exact his life for the last deadly blow.

Bideskúty came from a race that in spite—perhaps because—of its want of education, its semi-barbarousness, its love of gross material pleasures, had never known fear. He realised, by the look on András's face,

that he had gone too far ; and at the same moment also saw how completely he, past the prime of life, was at the mercy of this young son of the soil, to whom the heaped-up insults would give superhuman strength. His anger cooled in an instant, his cheek turned pale, but he never for a moment thought of calling for help. Thus for one second only they stood face to face, the arrogant noble and the deeply wounded peasant, András's hand raised ready to strike what might have been a death-blow. Suddenly a merry laugh outside seemed to paralyse his arm. Still holding it aloft, he was now gazing bewildered, fascinated, at the door, which had been noisily thrown open, and at a vision all in white, with bows of something soft and blue, and crowned with an aureole of golden curls, from under which peeped, half-frightened, a pair of eyes like forget-me-nots. What was it ? A bird escaped from its cage ? or one of those fairies who, according to the tales his mother used to tell him long ago, dwelt inside the petals of the roses, or within the sweet-scented corolla of the violet ?

But the bird sang, the fairy spoke, simple words: but they seemed to András the sweetest music mortal ears had ever heard.

"Papa, may we have a carriage, to drive down and see the new fishes in the lake?—Why, papa dear," added the snow-white vision, "how pale you are ! Are you ill ?"

András's hand had dropped numb by his side. His entranced gaze followed the flower-like vision, as it passed close to him, to throw a pair of lovely arms, so childlike, yet so protecting, round his enemy's neck.

Bideskúty was not a young man; the strain of the last few moments was heavy for him to bear, and, ex-

hausted, dazed, he sank in a chair. Ilonka had knelt by his side, and, with pretty endearing ways, was stroking the matted hair from his forehead. András gazed on; he could not see her face for her back was turned towards him, but he could see her soft white neck, peeping from out the folds of her gown, and there were one or two golden curls just above that made him think of some earthly paradise. She had not vouchsafed another look to the peasant, who, she vaguely guessed, had been tiresome, and had angered "papa."

Mechanically he passed his hand across his forehead, from which two or three drops of blood still trickled slowly down his pale cheek; he stooped and picked up the bag of gold, and fastened it inside his belt; then he looked once more at the golden vision, drank in every line of that graceful, girlish figure, as if he wished never to part from dreams of her again: it was a long, lingering look, so ardent, so magnetic, that Ilonka must, somehow, have felt it, for she turned half shyly round, and her tender, forget-me-not eyes met András's burning gaze.

The next moment he had left the room, the castle, had crossed the shady acacia drive, and, calling to Csillag, he jumped upon her back, and without looking round again, had galloped away across the *puszta*.

CHAPTER XIII

VENGEANCE

ANDRÁS would not allow himself to think, would not allow his mind to revert, even for one instant, to the last awful moments he had just gone through. The sun still shone fiercely, though it was beginning to sink low down in the west, and the wound on his forehead burned at times like the newly made brand-mark on the convict's back, the badge of shame. He avoided the main roads and the fields, dreading to meet the comrades who must be waiting anxiously for the fulfilment of his promise to them, not daring to tell them how he had failed in his trust, how he had allowed his own pride and then a pair of forget-me-not eyes to force him to quit the battle-field, to turn his back on the enemy before the victory was won.

On he spurred Csillag across the desolate plain, and her hoofs, as she thundered past, roused the rooks from their evening rest, and the drowsy little lizards from their sleep. As he neared Kisfalu, from every field shouts hailed him, but he heeded them not, and never stopped Csillag in her wild career till she reached her own stable door foaming and panting.

With the same tender care as usual, András began grooming the lovely creature, wiping the foam from her quivering haunches, stroking her ears, and patting her neck. It seemed as if Csillag understood the bitter

thoughts which swelled her master's heart to bursting, and felt that a kindly feeling of sympathy would perhaps ease this overburdened heart. Gently she rubbed her sleek nose against his hand, asking for a caress, some fondling in return. Her great eyes looked so affectionately, so sorrowfully at András, that his wounded heart at last eased itself in a passionate outburst of tears. No one saw him, there was no one who could ever record having seen this sturdy, powerful man for once in his life under the spell of an emotion which completely overmastered him. That one act of weakness seemed to take the bitterness from out the wound. His head resting against the mare's sleek neck, he cried as he used to do at his mother's knee, when the stern father's blows had been more than the child could bear; great sobs shook his powerful frame, and one of his hands was placed across the mare's eyes, lest she should see the stigma of shame that burned unavenged upon his forehead.

When a quarter of an hour later he went into the house to kiss his mother, there was no trace of tears in his eyes, not a vestige of the torrent of emotion which had, for a brief moment, threatened to crush this passionate native of the Hungarian soil. But Eitelka's keen eyes noted at once the look of dejection on his face, and she shook her head sadly, for she understood that her son had failed.

"Mother," said András, taking a sheet of paper from his breast pocket, and spreading it out on the table before him, "will you put aside your spinning and listen to this a moment? I want your advice."

Obediently, Eitelka pushed the spindle aside, and, folding her hands before her, prepared to listen. The rays of the now rapidly setting sun found their way

through the small windows, throwing a halo of light round the old peasant woman. She was accustomed to being consulted by her son about all his business. Though she invariably approved of what he had done, he was not happy until she had said that she was satisfied.

"You remember, mother, all three documents which I hold from my lord, about the money I have lent him, and about the interest?"

"Yes, my boy, I remember them all."

"I want to read them over to you, mother, and I want you to weigh again very carefully in your mind if there is anything unfair in the dealings."

"I know there was nothing unfair in them, András, and the interest was very low, too low, in fact, I thought."

"Ah, but mother, this is important," said András earnestly, "it is a matter of life and death to me. You must listen to every word, as if you had never heard them before."

"I am listening, András."

"One of these papers is now five years old, mother; it is dated in April, 1855. It says: 'I owe you 300,000 florins in gold; for this, until I repay you in full, I will pay you interest every year, one hundred head of cattle, of which there will be ten bulls and ninety cows, and five thousand measures of wheat. If in any year I fail to pay you this interest, and on your then demanding the repayment of the principal, I am unable to give it to you, then the farmhouse of Kisfalu and all the fields, vineyards, and buildings from the Nádasdy *puszta* to the town of Béla, and from the banks of the Tarna to the high-road opposite, shall belong to you absolutely and you will then have no further claim on the 300,000

florins you have lent me.' This is signed Bideskúty Gyuri, and below is Rosenstein's name as witness. There is the stamp on it which the government demands and for which I paid."

András paused and looked anxiously at his mother.

"I remember," she said, "you wanted to increase your herd of cows; it is reasonable, my son, quite fair: for each cow which you sold for money to Rosenstein afterwards you had from 150 to 200 florins. It is not only fair, my son, it is generous."

"The second paper, mother, is for 300,000 florins, and it says: 'I will pay you five thousand measures of wheat, twelve thousand measures of maize, and one hundred head of sheep, of which five shall be rams, and if I fail to pay the interest in any one year, and, on your demanding it, also fail to repay you the principal, then my fields, vineyards, and dependencies of Bideskút, and all buildings save the house I live in and the adjoining stables, shall become yours absolutely.' This paper is dated three years later, and is signed like the other."

"That is as generous as you could allow it, András. You know the Jews would exact ten times that amount, and more."

"The third paper, mother," continued András, "was signed two days ago: it is for 250,000 florins, for which my lord has promised me in writing, five thousand measures of wheat, and forty head of cattle, and for which he has given me Zárda as security, on the same conditions as the others."

"He is a spendthrift, and improvident man," said the old woman, shaking her head; "if he had borrowed all that money from the Jews, he would by now be a ruined man."

"You do firmly believe, mother," repeated András earnestly, "that I am doing no deed of usury, which would cause you to blush for your son?"

"Yes, András, I firmly believe that."

"Will you swear it, mother, on the crucifix?"

He detached a rough wooden image of the Saviour of mankind from the whitewashed wall, and with trembling hand held it close to his mother's lips.

"I swear it by our Lord Jesus Christ," she said, reverently kissing the dumb piece of wood. A deep sigh of relief escaped András's oppressed chest; he placed the crucifix back in its place, then drew a chair close to his mother's knee.

The old woman did not quite understand what her son was driving at, but her motherly heart felt that he was in some trouble, and she was content to ask nothing, only to try and soothe her boy now, as she had done ever since he was a wee lad, and had come to her, after his stern father's buffetings, for comfort. Gently she stroked the hair away from his forehead.

"András," she asked, "where did you get this blow?"

"The lord of Bideskút dealt it, mother!" he said impetuously, "and it has remained unavenged."

"My lord struck you, András?"

"Yes, mother, and I was coward enough not to return the blow."

"Tell me, András, I am anxious, I do not understand."

And András tried to tell her from beginning to end his fruitless interview with the noble lord; he told her how he had explained at first, begged from that man, who was even then making merry with a hundred guests, to have some pity for the weak, the ignorant and unhappy. He told her of the noble lord's arro-

gance, his insults, his blows. It was such a relief to tell her all. The mother's heart, ignorant, uneducated as she was, understood and sympathised, knew how to soothe and to make him forget. He told her all, of how a girlish arm had placed itself protectingly round her father's neck, making numb his own, which had been raised ready to return blow for blow. But what he did not tell, not even to the gentle consoler, the fond, indulgent mother, was that, since that moment, a fairy vision, crowned with golden curls, always danced before his gaze, making fun of him, with smiling forget-me-not eyes; that he had galloped across the plain to try and leave that vision behind, but that she followed him, even to this simple farmhouse, which suddenly had begun to András to look so bare, so poor, so unworthy even to hold the fitting vision of an aristocratic girl. What he did not tell was that suddenly his peasant clothes seemed rough and dirty, his hands hard and brown, his step heavy, that he would have longed to stretch out his arm and grasp the enchanting vision, but felt how rough he was, how far, very far, away beneath it, and that his arms then dropped down numb by his side, and great tears of shame and envy trickled slowly down his cheeks.

The mother, though dimly guessing that something else was weighing heavily on her son's soul besides the insult and the blow, yet found in her heart plenty of love with which to make him forget all save the happiness of home, the joys of sitting at his mother's knee. The sun had quite sunk down, far out in the west; great dark shadows collected in the corners of the room. Sári and Kati brought in the candles, and the evening meal. But it was eaten in silence;

mother and son felt weighted with the presentiment of coming evil.

The meal was cleared away. András had asked that the candles might be taken away; he longed to sit quietly in the dark, close to his mother, her fond, sympathising hand resting on his burning forehead, so as to chase away the devils of hatred and revenge which ran riot in his brain. He longed for peace and darkness too because he wanted to indulge in the nursing of a certain fairy vision, which in broad, prosy light, his own common-sense told him to chase away, but which in the gloom, became akin to a dream, from which the awaking, perhaps, would not be so bitter.

How long mother and son sat there, in the dark, they hardly knew; the flight of evening hours is not counted on this spot of earth where clocks are rare.

Etelka, who had no fitting visions on which to dwell, had closed her eyes, and her quiet breathing made a soothing accompaniment to András's wakeful dreams. Suddenly it seemed as if a curious light were discernible through the open casement, out beyond the desolate plain, on the horizon far away. András had sprung to his feet, and gazed out, not understanding at first the lurid light which gradually illumined the sky. A hurried, anxious knock at the outer door had also aroused Etelka, and the two little maids had run in, looking very frightened. Every mind, even the simplest, had been on tension the whole day, and when Sári and Kati had first noticed the curious light which came from neither moon nor sun, they rushed, terror-stricken, to their master for comfort and explanation.

But András had become very pale, and Etelka now was gazing out, horrified, her cheeks blanched with fear.

"Fire!" she whispered, awe-struck, under her breath.

"Yes! it is fire, mother, fire, on the Bideskút estate. The maize fields lie just there," replied András, "and there has been no rain for two weeks; the fields will burn like hay."

"The fire seems to come from two or three different points. It is God's judgment on my lord," said Etelka, superstitiously crossing herself.

"Mother, I am going to see if I can be of any help; let Sári and Kati run out and send any of our fellows they may meet, as fast as they can. Here are the keys of the stables; they must choose the fastest horses, and follow at once. And you, mother dear, while I am gone," he added, solemnly, "kneel down before your crucifix, and pray to God that He may stay His vengeance from the heads of those who have planned this murderous deed."

And hastily kissing his mother, András was once more at the stable and soon had started off to ride towards Bideskút.

Far out ahead, the deep, red light had spread right across the horizon. Through the absolute silence of the night, across the vast immensity of the plain, could be heard weird, terrified cries from afar: the frightened lowing of cattle, the bleating of frightened sheep, the cries of the juhász (shepherds) as they endeavoured to drive their herds for safety on to the bleak and arid plain.

Faster and faster the red light spread, and, as András galloped on, herds of wild horses thundered past him, terrified, their manes flying, their tails lashing out furiously.

Already he could see the flames, spreading with terrible rapidity across the fields, where he knew the corn lay, stacked, the most helpless prey to the fury of the

flames. The plain, usually so silent and peaceful at night, under the blue vault of heaven, beneath the glittering stars, was now alive with terror-stricken cries, which seemed to rise from everywhere. A slight summer breeze fanned the flames, and spread them eastwards over rich maize fields, wooden sheds, and even stables. András galloped on, his heart full of dark foreboding, gazing at the fire kindled by God's hands, his mother had said, to punish the arrogant lord.

CHAPTER XIV

CALAMITY

BIDESKÚTY had had a severe shock in his interview with his wealthy tenant, and it took him some little time to resume his cordial *bonhomie*, and to restore his animal spirits to their usual elasticity. A feeling he could not have explained had deterred him from relating the particulars of the interview to his guests, and thus finding solace to his wrath, by listening to their violent abuse of the meddlesome and insolent peasant.

Somehow Bideskúty was not altogether satisfied with himself. He felt just a little ashamed of his unwarrantable hastiness towards this man, whom it would have been decidedly in his interest to conciliate, and win over to the side of his pet hobbies. Kemény András's prestige among the peasantry he knew to be boundless, and a little in spite of himself he was forced to admit that he could well understand the handsome young peasant's cheering influence. Surely he was a fool not to have made an ally of this man, instead of, by insults and a blow, making a bitter and deadly enemy of him. Never for a moment did he regret not having sold him the mill: he was firmly convinced that the peasant's motives in wishing to buy it were not as disinterested as he stated them to be. But now that he knew that the money of which he always was in need really came from the peasant's

purse, he regretted not having concluded some amicable treaty, by which he might have persuaded András not to charge such usurious interest on his capital as that blood-sucking intermediary of his, Rosenstein, demanded. By making a mortal enemy of his creditor, Bideskúty foresaw every kind of hostility to which he might in future be subjected, and probably the finding of the purse strings tightly closed, when next he would require a loan.

Most of the afternoon Bideskúty had sat silent, and decidedly sulky, apart from his guests, and seeking consolation for his ruffled temper in the soothing clouds he drew from his cherry-wood pipe. As for Ilonka, she was much too childish to understand the terrible situation which her sudden entrance had interrupted. She little guessed that it was her own unconscious beauty which had averted from her father's head what might have proved a death-blow, and from a man's soul what would have been lifelong remorse. She had only caught sight of a tall, broad-shouldered figure of a peasant who, evidently, had much angered papa, and who had looked at her in a way that she could not quite understand, and certainly had not the power to analyse. But all this she had forgotten by the time the evening shadows had rendered the garden cool; like her mother's curtain lecture of the night before, she had thrown off every unpleasant sensation in order to enjoy the present as she found it.

She and all her younger guests had devised, for the night's entertainment, an absolutely novel form of enjoyment. Topsy-turvydom was called to assist in making the walls of Bideskút ring with laughter that shook them to their foundations, and made stern Attila totter on his pedestal. Truly it was a motley throng

which filed up the great stone staircase and through the vast halls of the old mansion. Pretty, laughing faces peeped above male attire, while bearded faces looked irresistibly comic from beneath feminine head-gear. The order was that all the girls should appear in men's clothes, and all the men in what articles of feminine attire they could manage to borrow.

The lumber room had been ransacked, where generations of Bideskútys had stored away apparel which had become too antiquated to wear, and in great oak chests, dainty, high-waisted dresses of the beginning of last century, and rich brocades and hooped skirts of grandmother's days, were found in gorgeous plenty. Grandfather's brass-buttoned coats, with high stock collar and sugar-loaf hat, and great-grandfather's gorgeously embroidered plum-silk coat, with satin knee-breeches, and red-heeled shoes, were there, laid in strong black tobacco to keep away the moth.

And, laughingly, the madcap, juvenile throng had arrayed itself in these relics of past days. Ilonka had borrowed her father's national costume: the blue watered-silk "attila" (a military-shaped frock-coat) with jewelled clasps, the black velvet cloak with sable collar and jewel buttons, the grey Hungarian breeches, the great curved sword with heavy jewelled hilt, belt, and sheath. She looked bewitching, with a cap set rakishly on one side, its long heron's feather held with a jewelled clasp. There surely never had been a more fascinating Hungarian magnate. Against that, her partner, Madách Feri, whose sentimental love for the pretty girl never damped his spirit of fun and merriment, looked irresistibly comic, in Countess Irma's national "párta," a tiara-shaped head-dress of gold lace tied at the nape of the neck, with a large bow and

long ends; the tight-fitting corselet with its jewelled clasps would not close over his manly waist, and showed a sad breach in front, filled with the billowy softness of the muslin shift, beneath the puffy sleeves of which his brown arms appeared. The ample folds of his white satin skirt, and the characteristic apron of gold lace, hung limp to about a foot from the ground, displaying a pair of large feet in huzzar top-boots. His heavy, dark moustache added a generally disreputable air to his very aristocratic costume.

Then, there was a red-cheeked, bright-eyed Kantássy Mariska. She had elected to appear as a lowland peasant, and the full white lawn shirt and ample trousers became her very well; she had placed her round cap with its sprig of rosemary on one side of her pretty head, and, burying her hand in the broad leather belt with huge brass ornaments and clasps, she mimicked the rolling gait of the peasantry with irresistible charm. Close to her, Bartócz Feri as a Hungarian "mennyecke" (maiden), was decidedly not graceful. His "párta" would not keep in the middle, and his row upon row of coloured beads looked sadly out of place round his hairy neck. He had a number of cotton skirts, one over the other, each of a different colour, in truly approved style, but he had not the art of swinging them as he walked, to display the kaleidoscope of colours, which the pretty Hungarian peasant girls do to perfection.

There were the daintiest possible powdered gallants of a hundred years ago, in satin coat and breeches, with lace ruffles and three-cornered hats; the dainty legs in silk stockings looked bewitching over the tiny feet encased in scarlet-heeled shoes with paste buckles; but their ladies, in rich patterned brocades and hooped

skirts, anything but fulfilled the preconceived ideas of the dainty coquettes of Louis XV.'s court. Ungainly shepherdesses of Watteau's day acted as a foil to the most charming shepherds that ever stepped out of the artist's canvas, and heavily bearded gipsies in petticoats, to fascinating *czigány* in picturesque rags.

As for Géza Vecsery, the boisterous Lord-Lieutenant, he had discovered some white *tarlatan* skirts which must once have belonged to a pupil of Taglioni's in the days when dancing was still one of the fine arts; on his ungainly figure the pink bodice and airy fleshings and skirts looked supremely comic, and he created the greatest sensation when, with the action of an elephant dancing on the tight rope, he tripped shyly into the room.

The supper was more boisterous and merry than any meal which had ever taken place at Bideskút; the valets and maids had been pressed into following the topsy-turvy rule of the evening, and grey-haired Jankó in a scarlet corselet and pink petticoat was solemnly pouring out wine, whilst the other valets, each of whom wore the regulation Hungarian waxed moustache, all entered into the spirit of the fun by donning the gay-coloured skirts, and ribbons of national hue, of the maids. The latter formed a charming bevy of valets, with "attilas" decidedly too large for their slim waists, and very shapely-looking legs encased in the characteristic tight-fitting Hungarian breeches.

Never was there so lively a *csárdás* in the lowlands as the one that was danced in the great hall of Bideskút that night after supper. The graceful cavaliers were a dainty picture to behold, stepping the *csárdás* with their tiny booted feet, clapping their heels together in

most jaunty fashion, as if they never had been encumbered with petticoats in their lives; but their ladies, unaccustomed to the embarrassing folds of their brocade and satin skirts, managed to put an amount of grotesqueness in the graceful dance which was quite irresistible; and the older folk who had not joined in the madcap masquerade made themselves dizzy with laughter at the simpering manners and arch coquetry put on by budding ambassadors and gallant young huzzars.

The *czigány* needed no incentive to alternate dreamy lassu (the slow movement of the dance) with the liveliest *csárdás*, without rest or respite, needed no shouts of "Ujra!" (encore) and "Húzd rá *czigány!*" (play on *tsigane*) to put strength into their lean arms. Sometimes they could hardly play for very laughing, when one of the arch coquettes, in a graceful evolution, became hopelessly mixed in the full satin gown, and came, with scanty grace, tumbling to the ground; or when Géza Vecsery, the acknowledged patron of every gypsy band in the land, executed an approved *pirouette*, which invariably ended in a catastrophe on the floor.

No one had noticed in the midst of this boisterous gaiety, towards the end of the long-drawn-out *csárdás*, that Jankó, still wearing the grotesque feminine travesty, had slipped into the room, and had whispered a few words in his master's ear, his face looking ghastly pale, nor had any of the lively, thoughtless revellers seen their host rise thereupon suddenly, his face almost livid, and follow his valet out of the room.

Some twenty minutes later the *csárdás* came to a crashing end, with a wild twirling and turning like some Bacchanalian dance of classic times. The men

were shouting, the girls, with flaming cheeks and eyes aglow, made a final effort for a boisterous finale; then, all hot and panting, the ladies most ungracefully mopping their foreheads, the cavaliers making most unmanly use of their fans, dispersed from the immediate vicinity of the band, to spread themselves, a laughing, boisterous crowd, in the cooler parts of the house.

A few had strolled into the dining hall, and it was from their awe-struck cry that all those dressed-up, masquerading merry-makers had the first intimation of the terrible catastrophe that even at this moment was spreading sorrow and desolation over the head of their genial host.

Through the windows of the hall the entire sky appeared illumined by a lurid light, which was half obscured by clouds of black smoke driven slanting towards the east; whilst through the thickly-leaved branches of the acacia trees could be caught glimpses of flames like some gigantic distant furnace.

The air was filled with sounds of rushing and of shouting, horses neighed with terror, while the cries of the herdsmen sounded weird and terrifying as they cracked their whips to drive the beasts away from the immediate danger of the flames. The melancholy bleating of the lambs, rushing after one another in blind helplessness, following the wether's bell as he guided his troop of affrighted companions right into the very thickest of the danger, mingled with the curses of the shepherds and the barking of the sheep dogs trying to keep the terrified flock together.

In the grounds, rushing from every stable, every out-house, labourers, servants and peasants, ran excitedly down the acacia drive, while kitchenmaids and house-

maids stood in awed groups, whispering and gazing, horrified, beyond. Hardly had the crowd of aristocratic merry-makers realised the terrible catastrophe which had occurred, than a huge column of flames, not half a league away to the right, rose with a distant hissing sound into the air, while to the left and straight ahead, a burning glow seemed to turn the entire landscape into one gigantic furnace. Terrified, they all gazed outwards, speechless, for a moment, then the weird whisper of "Fire!" was passed from mouth to mouth.

Trembling, the gay revellers in fantastic masquerade clung to one another, and dainty court gallants and gaily decked-out beaux stood with blanched cheeks, not daring to speak loudly of the terrible catastrophe which, even now, had changed this abode of merry-making into one of sorrow and terror. Throughout the house there was a general stampede. The men, forgetting their grotesque attire, had turned towards the staircase, and were now hurrying across the great entrance hall and down the acacia alley; others had raided the stables, and, without pausing to find saddle or bridle, had jumped on the horses, and galloped across the yard and down the drive at breakneck speed, as that race of born horsemen are alone able to do. And in the dismal night, illuminated from afar by the lurid light of the glowing furnace, this cavalcade seemed like the midnight ride of some grotesque witches on their way to the Sabbath. Some of the men had hastily wrenched off the cumbersome skirts which impeded their movements, but others, in too great a haste to try and undo the many unaccustomed fastenings, had gathered up their petticoats, and in their wild ride the white satin and brocade skirts,

looked like witches' wings, which caught sharp lurid lights as they fluttered in the wind. Weirdly grotesque they looked, with dainty head-dresses fallen to one side, bows fluttering round their bearded faces, their brown arms emerging bare from out the puffed muslin or lace sleeves—a scene that in a fantastic ballet would have convulsed an audience with laughter, but which here added a hundred-fold more horror to the catastrophe which had fallen in the very midst of so much madcap merry-making.

One by one the ladies, young and old, had snatched up shawl or wrap, and, in frightened groups of three and four, were finding their way across the roads towards the burning fields. Countess Irma and Ilonka, clinging to one another in a mutual desire for comfort, led the way; the pretty young girl forgetting her male attire, her thoughts paralysed by the disaster, of which, child as she was, she could not but foresee the consequences, her mother mutely upbraiding destiny for having ventured to fall with a heavy hand upon her aristocratic head.

Out there in the fields the scene was one of awful weirdness and magnificence. The wheat which was lying in stacks ready for threshing and grinding, as well as that which was still uncut, the fields of maize, the hay and straw, all had proved but a too easy prey to the flames, and the fire had, in a few moments, spread with astonishing rapidity. When the cavalcade of grotesque mummers appeared upon the scene, all as far as the eye could reach seemed to be part of a gigantic, seething, burning furnace, standing out in lurid red and gold, against the dark canopy of the sky above. Terrible, mysterious, magnificent, it rose like a living curtain of flames, hissing and lashing, de-

stroying all things, as it spread to right and left, untrammelled and merciless. And, dotted here and there against this fiery background, the black silhouettes of men and beasts, rushing hither and thither, frightened, like some pigmies, face to face with an awe-inspiring giant.

The air was full of sounds of anguish and terror : the stampede of the beasts, as they were driven out of the threatened stables, towards the distant *puszta*, which, arid and desolate, was the only safe shelter, the only barrier, against the fast-spreading enemy; the melancholy lowing of the oxen, the frightened bleating of the sheep, the shouts and cries of the men, the wail of anguish of the women, and through it all, the hissing, roaring of the flames, as they attacked now a fresh field of nodding wheat, now an outlying shed, whose dry tinder crackled as it burnt. Relentlessly the enemy moved forward. There was no terrible crash, no sudden, loud conflagration or explosion. The ways of a fire on the lowlands are sure, swift, and silent.

Anon a field of maize was in a blaze, and each plume, as it was seized upon by the flames, threw out a shower of sparks like golden dewdrops; then a stack of straw would flare up, smokeless in the dry air, only burning swiftly down to the ground, helping to spread the conflagration ever on and on. And the poor frightened beasts, not understanding why their sheltering stables were closed against them, or what was the meaning of this strange light, lurid and hot, rushed about, panting and snorting, in a terrified circle, always turning blindly towards that stable door which was closed against them. The shepherds and herdsmen worked with a will. With relentless energy they tried to keep their herds together, hoping to get them

well out of reach before some straying spark caught the dry thatch of the first group of stables.

It certainly, at this moment, looked as if it would be impossible to save the farther buildings. Bideskúty, who, with the greatest calm, had up to this point given directions to every one of his outdoor and indoor servants to see to the beasts first and foremost, began to notice with astonishment, and then with terror, that there seemed to be no one else there to lend a hand in at least parrying some of the worst consequences of the dire catastrophe.

The conflagration must have been seen for leagues around, and yet, though Bideskúty had sent for assistance in every direction, neither from Árokszállás nor from the outlying cottages on the road to Gyöngyös did either messenger return, or aid arrive.

It seemed terrible, the isolation of this man, standing alone, gazing at the ruin which was fast closing in upon him. And, sombre, he paced up and down, the awful truth gradually breaking upon him, that the remorseless devastation of his year's crops, his probable complete ruin, was not the hand of God, falling with divine justice on him, as it might have done on any of his neighbours, but was the deliberate revengeful work of some incendiary miscreant. And, with deep curses, the lord of Bideskút muttered the name of him whom he believed to be his deadly enemy, him whom, in his unreasoning arrogance, he had but a few hours ago so deeply wounded.

Bideskúty knew nothing of human nature ; his careless disposition, his very arrogance and pride of caste, prevented him from reading the open book of his neighbours' characters and feelings, which lies before all who are willing to read. To him, Kemény András,

rich or poor, educated or ignorant, would always remain the low-born peasant, descendant of a race of serfs, once the very property of his own ancestors. To him low deeds, such as he now attributed to András, were the necessary outcome of low birth. In his mind there was but one nobility, and that was the one which a long line of ancestry alone could give. As he stood now isolated, having sent off his bailiffs in every direction to try and induce the peasantry round to give him some help, to at least save his beasts, his house, since his fields were irrevocably doomed, he worked himself up to a very fever of rage against all the low-born miscreants who had dared to raise their hand against their lord.

Vainly his wife and daughter tried to pacify him ; he was like some caged wild beast, not heeding his own guests, who stood round him willing, eager to help, to be directed as to where that help was most needed. He would not listen save to his own tempestuous passion, would not speak, save to hurl curses on the head of his supposed enemy. And the grotesque cavalcade of mummers stood about in fantastic groups like an army eager to fight, but disorganised and leaderless ; while the ladies, forgetting their masculine attire, added to the confusion by sobs of terror, anxious questionings, and loud, wailing prayers.

"My lord," suddenly said a voice close to Bideskúty's elbow, "we shall have to organise, and very quickly too, a chain of buckets from the nearest well to those farther stables. Any flying spark may now set them ablaze ; the poor beasts in that quarter are cut off from the plain by the fire. They must be protected at any cost."

It was Kemény András on his beautiful thoroughbred

mare, whose quivering neck he was quietly patting as he spoke.

"I would have been here sooner," he added, "only the way to Kisfalu is also cut off by the fire."

Bideskúty, on hearing that voice, turned, as some long-caged wild beast, face to face at last with his prey. His lips moved convulsively as if to speak; his face, livid with rage, looked almost fiendish in expression in the lurid light that illuminated it. But the peasant stopped the words in his mouth, by pointing quietly to the stables.

"After that, we will resume our quarrel," he said; "now let those who are willing follow me."

And the mare, encouraged by a cheering word, once more started at a swift gallop in the direction where the fire was more rapidly gaining ground. No one needed twice telling; as András rode away the entire cavalcade of grotesque figures followed with a lively shout.

Astonished, frowning, Bideskúty looked after them, watching with a scowl that was half wrathful, wholly puzzled, the powerful figure on the thoroughbred as he galloped on, his white shirt-sleeves fluttering behind him, his cheery voice sounding above the cries of anguish of men and beasts, above the distant stampede of frightened herds; and, instinctively, Bideskúty himself felt that quieting influence which was András's own over every man who knew him. His muttered curses ceased, a ray of hope seemed to have filtrated through his heart, he managed to give an encouraging kiss to his wife and daughter, to listen quietly to the consoling words of those of his guests who were too old or too slow to render much assistance.

Eagerly he watched the band of workers, headed by

András, as, outlined against the sky, he saw them scaling the thatched roof of the stables, and forming a living chain along the ladders, propped against the side of the buildings, and as far as the nearest well; they passed buckets after buckets full of water from hand to hand, and deluged the dry thatch, making it secure against the flying sparks. Distinctly he could hear their excited shouts as they took each building in its turn, running up and down the ladders, grotesque in the extreme, with their puffed muslin sleeves, their fluttering bows of ribbon, their semi-masculine, semi-feminine garb. They were doing their work well, encouraged, led by one man whom Bideskúty, from the distance, seemed to see everywhere at one and the same time, the man whom in his heart and with many curses he believed to be his deadly enemy, whom he accused boldly of having perpetrated the dastardly deed.

"Who is that man, Gyuri," asked Count Kantássy, who also had watched the peasant for some time, with the Hungarian's heartfelt admiration for a perfect rider on a perfect horse.

"That was Kemény András, the rich farmer from Kisfalu."

"A man of will and energy, Gyuri; he and our young friends will save the group of stables and all the poor beasts, I am sure, and, moreover, give an effectual check to the flames in that direction, in any case."

"Do you think anybody can save the house?" asked the Countess drearily.

Kantássy looked sadly round. Truly the spectacle was heart-breaking. The fire had received an effectual check to the south and east by the arid plain, but towards the north in a westerly direction, it seemed as

if there was nothing that could prevent the flames from spreading even as far as the house of Bideskút itself. Already the conflagration formed a gigantic semicircle which appeared every moment to be closing in on the entire property of the unfortunate lord.

It was obvious that a willing and really numerous band of workers was wanted to accomplish the most important salvage : that of the house and the larger block of stables.

"I cannot understand," said old Palotay, "where all those beastly, good-for-nothing lazy peasants are sticking. It looks for all the world," he added in a whisper, so that Bideskúty might not hear, "as if they had arranged it among themselves not to help in any way."

But Bideskúty had heard.

"They have arranged it among themselves to ruin me," he said hopelessly ; "it is no use fighting ; we can do nothing while we are so short-handed."

"I will ride, if you like, across to Árokszállás," said Count Kantássy, "and see if I cannot bring a few idle hands with me."

"It is useless," said Bideskúty, "nobody will come. I have sent in every direction. It seems as if the earth had swallowed up every peasant for leagues around. They do not come."

"Here comes your rich peasant, riding back. Ask him if he cannot get help."

"I will ask him nothing," said Bideskúty surlily ; "I would sooner see every stick of mine burnt to ashes."

His two friends had no time to reply, for the next instant András had galloped past them, shouting as he went :

"We want more hands, my lord. I am going to

Árokszállás to get them. In the meanwhile will your Honour order every scythe, sickle, and spade to be taken to that group of fields yonder? We shall have to cut some of the maize down, or the house will be in danger."

The next moment he was again out of sight.

Bideskúty said nothing, but he turned obediently towards his threatened house, followed by those of his friends who were near him, and by his wife and daughter. Poor little Ilonka, she had been too frightened to do anything save cling pitifully to her mother's skirts, as some tiny chicken hiding beneath the wing of the hen. But now she ventured timidly to look up, in order to follow, with curious questioning gaze, the figure of the man whose name she had heard so often on this memorable day.

"He is a good man, mama," she said with conviction, while her blue eyes filled with tears of gratitude. "I was angry with him to-day because he had annoyed papa, but I forgive him now, for he is very good."

"Probably he is trying to make amends, my dear," said the incorrigibly proud Countess; "no doubt he knows that your papa will pay him well for his services, and he is only doing his duty. Your papa is his lord."

Bideskúty smiled bitterly to himself. He alone understood the unconscious irony of his wife's words.

CHAPTER XV

REPARATION

ANDRÁS, in the meanwhile, had almost reached the village. He knew, as well as the noble lord, that this night's devastation was the work of man and not of God, and that it was the poor superstitious, frightened wretches, yonder in those cottages, whose hand had done the dastardly deed, and who now refused, surly and defiant, to try and check the terrible catastrophe they, in their criminal folly, had brought about.

The village seemed at first strangely deserted ; the little thatched cottages to the right and left of the only street were dark and desolate-looking ; even the inn appeared solitary, not a sound emerged through its half-opened doors. András dismounted, and led his horse along the road towards the presbytery ; he reckoned on Pater Ambrosius to lend him the weight of his influence on the obstinate minds of the peasants, and inwardly wondered how it was that he had not met the kind old priest on his way to the scene of the fire, with cross and sacrament, to pray to God to stay His just and wrathful hand.

The next moment, however, he saw the explanation to this, for he had reached the presbytery, which was literally blockaded by a crowd of men sitting and standing round, some smoking in surly silence, others discussing eagerly, all turning towards the glow which suffused the sky.

It was very dark, street illumination being still unknown in the Hungarian lowlands, and András could do no more than just distinguish the outlines of these groups of malcontents, and to guess their object in thus congregating outside Pater Ambrosius' door ; for though he could not see the good old priest himself, he could hear his voice, apparently from some window of his presbytery, expostulating, preaching, admonishing, scolding, and entreating alternately to be allowed to go and pray for my lord, who was in such dire trouble, and threatening a total suspension of absolution, and excommunication of the entire village, if he was not permitted to perform his priestly duty.

Surlily they all smoked on, not listening to the kindly voice, which always brought spiritual comfort to their simple minds. Obstinate they remained deaf to every appeal, determined to carry on their crime, their folly, to its utmost dire limit.

"Do not speak any more words to them, Pater," suddenly said a voice in the darkness; "they are not worthy that you should let your kind eyes rest upon their evil forms, even for a moment."

Calmly András stood among them, his usually so merry eyes looking with contempt and anger at the men who had all instinctively turned, as they recognised the voice of their friend.

"András!" was the general cry of astonishment.

"Stop that," he said peremptorily; "do not dare to speak to me by my name. It is the name of an honest man, and can but be polluted by passing through the mouths of miscreants."

There was a dead silence ; astonished, the men looked at one another, thinking their favourite had gone mad. They had never heard such words from him.

"Miscreant is an ugly word, young man," said old Vas Berczi, with a threatening tone in his voice, as he advanced towards András.

"Ay! an ugly word, man, but not half so ugly as the dark, murderous deed your cowardly hands have accomplished to-night. Stand back, there!" he added, as one or two of the peasants in the foremost ranks came close up to him, "I forbid you to speak to me, to come within a foot of me, or to lay a finger on Csillag, for she surely would die of the pestilence."

"Has he gone mad?" whispered one voice to another. "What does he mean?" suggested another. But all had retreated; none spoke to him, and one or two, as if in awe, looked at their brown hands, whose touch, he said, was pestilence and death.

"András," came Pater Ambrosius' pleading voice from the dark, "you used to have influence over them; speak to them, my son, persuade them, at least, since they are not Christians, and will not assist my lord in his distress, to let me go and pray for the poor man, who must be sadly in want of God's help."

"I am here, Father, to take you to your church, or to the terrible scene from which I have just come, and where I shall go back at once; as for speaking to these miscreants, I will not do it. Their very breath is offensive to me and to Csillag. You and I, Father, will go back to where a poor old man, with his wife and daughter, is watching his all fall a prey to ruin; to where poor frightened beasts rush helplessly about, only to meet with a terrible death in the fire which these children of hell have kindled. The pride of our county of Heves, of the entire Hungarian lowland, is laid to dust, when dastardly hands wreak cowardly vengeance on innocent beasts of burden. Come, Father,

let us go; you can come back when your work of praying is done; as for me, if I am not fortunate enough to bury myself and my shame in the flames that devastate the land of which I was so proud, I will, to-morrow, collect my household goods and, like the *czigány* tramp, wander away across the *puszta*, in search of a spot where I can once more speak to an honest man. Let Pater Ambrosius pass! He is waiting at the door!"

Never had they heard such cruel words, the tones of which were sharp and cutting as a two-edged sickle, and the contempt so bitter, so absolutely humiliating, that even in the darkness they felt their bronzed cheeks burn with shame.

What did András mean? He who, in all their grievances, their complaints, had always stood by their side, ready to cheer, to explain, to alleviate. He who had always, with a bright smile, thrown down every barrier which his riches and his influence would otherwise have built between him and them, the humble labourers who worked for his liberal wage; now he even refused to allow them to speak his name or to touch his horse; as if their words and their touch were the most abasing pollution. Was what they had done, then, so very awful? Was it not just revenge? was it really, as he said, so very cowardly? A crime and not justice? True, there were the wife and daughter of my lord; they had had nothing to do with those cursed inventions of Satan . . . and then there were the poor beasts . . . the beautiful Hungarian horses . . . the stables of Bideskút are famed throughout the lowlands . . . and a good many of the mares were with colt . . . then the oxen who could not run . . . and who were so timid and easily scared . . .

Silently the groups had parted to make way for Pater Ambrosius now as he joined András and prepared to mount behind him. Kemény, in the meanwhile, though still retaining the contemptuous attitude he had adopted, and seemingly taking no further heed of the men, just as if they were the very dust upon the plain, was, nevertheless, quietly watching the effect his hard words had on those whom, in spite of their follies, he loved and sympathised with tenderly. It was because there had been no time to waste in persuasion and argument that he had adopted what he firmly believed was the right mode of getting at those obstinate, foolish, but not absolutely evil minds. The fate of the lord of Bideskút's home for one moment trembled in the balance, and, for the space of a minute, perhaps, there was hesitation ; but when András had actually mounted Csillag, and it became absolutely evident that he would not speak or look at them again, a timid voice ventured :

"You are not really leaving Kisfalu for ever, András, are you?"

"Who spoke?" he said, looking carelessly over his shoulder ; "has any man ever known me to say one thing and mean another? Come, Father, are you safe? Put your arms round my waist firmly ; Csillag will gallop fast."

"No, András, you are not going?"

"What is to become of us?"

"You would not leave us?"

"You will see us starve!" came from every side, and, anxious, really frightened at what would undoubtedly prove a calamity to them, the men crowded round their favourite eagerly, not quite daring yet to touch the mare, since he had forbidden it, but preventing her

from taking András away, if he was never to return.

"We thought, András, you would understand our troubles," said old Vas Berczi, still surly, but very much humbled; "you have gone over to the enemy and look down upon us poor folk, now."

András heaved a sigh of satisfaction. This was the beginning of capitulation; he had gained his point; the rest would be easy work.

"I do always enter into all your troubles, my men. Your sorrows are my sorrows," he said more kindly, "but you must have known that when you chose the ways of crime, our paths would lie divided for ever. Now, good-bye; let Csillag pass!"

"You will come back," they shouted, as Csillag reared, for her master had pressed his knees against her haunches.

"Never, except to press the hands of honest men, again."

"Ours, András, ours!" they shouted again, as the mare started at a rapid gallop down the village street.

András turned round once more to face them.

"Of those who will help me to stay the fire from reaching the house of Bideskút."

"Mine, András, mine," came from every one now; and one and all, young and old, eager, forgetting their grievances, their superstitions, their terrors, longing only for that warm, promised handshake, started running after the mare and her double burden.

But András had halted just outside the little church, whose quaint square tower stood out black against the brilliant, awful background beyond.

"God bless you all, my children" said Pater Ambrosius, as he slid to his feet, "but we must wait, and take our Lord with us!"

"Quick, Father, there is not a moment to lose," said András hurriedly; but he, like all the rest, had reverently lifted off his cap, and Pater Ambrosius, having fumbled for his keys, let himself in through the heavy door, leaving it open so that his erring flock, after their wild outburst of revengeful passion, should catch sight of the heavenly peace within the house of God. It was almost entirely in gloom within, save for the fitful, lurid light which glimmered through the small, deep-set Gothic windows; but the old priest knew his way well through the rough carved pews to the steps of the simple altar, from which, since nearly half a century, he had called forth God's blessing on his simple flock. With hasty genuflections he rapidly opened the Sanctum Sanctorum, and took out the golden crucible which contained the true body of his sovereign Lord.

"For God's sake, quick, Father!" said András's voice outside, and hastily wrapping the sacred emblem beneath his cassock, Pater Ambrosius once more mounted behind the young peasant.

The men had stood reverently silent during this brief passage of God amongst them, then, as once more Csillag set off at a sharp gallop, they, with a shout, started to run after her: a troupe of some two or three hundred of them, the entire able-bodied population of the little village, eager to redeem the past, to restore to their beloved lowland that pride which they, by their deed, had humbled; and when they at last reached the grounds of Bideskút, hot, panting, but as full of vigour as ever, they formed themselves in a line, ready to obey his orders to whom they wished to prove that they were still worthy of his regard and of his sympathy.

Bideskúty, in the meanwhile, had followed András's advice; there was no doubt that from the north now

very considerable danger threatened the old ancestral house. In that direction lay a very extensive field of maize, part of which was already ablaze and helping to spread the conflagration in serious proximity to the outhouses and stables. The unfortunate owner of all the devastated lands had collected round him the few willing hands that were available, and while his male guests in fantastic array were busy trying to rescue one corner of his property, he brought his few indoor servants and one or two of the more robust maids to attempt the salvage of the other.

With scythes, sickles, and spades they endeavoured to lay as much of the field low as possible, but though the small band worked hard and with a will, the enemy worked harder, drawing nearer and nearer, and after the first half-hour it became evident that unless help arrived numerous and swift, the clearing would not be sufficiently wide to effectually check the flames.

Bideskúty paced up and down the approaches to his fields, scanning anxiously the horizon from which the help should come. He would not allow himself to dwell upon his thoughts and his suspicions; he knew too well now that if, after this terrible night, he retained the roof above his head and any fragment of his threatened property, it would be thanks to the man whom that afternoon he had insulted and struck in the face. That the fire had been kindled by human hand, of that there could be no doubt; all that was left to hope for now was that the rich peasant would exert his influence to bring the criminals to the atonement of their own deed before it was too late.

The ladies had all retired to within the park gates. They were far too anxious to go indoors, and, in groups of two and three, they paced up and down the

acacia alleys, all wondering if the promised help would come, and all watching their fathers, brothers, husbands, still at work on the roofs of the threatened stables.

From afar, already Bideskúty heard the shouts of the peasants as they ran, headed by Csillag carrying her master, and Pater Ambrosius.

András brought his horse to a standstill close to Bideskúty, and having dismounted, he said :

"My lord, the Pater and I have brought you three hundred willing pairs of hands, who, with God's help, will at least save your house and stables from this terrible fire. Now, my men," he added, pointing to the maize fields, "start clearing away that tinder at once. Hack, cut, mow, tear, uproot ; let me see who can best devastate one of the finest fields of maize in the county. Take what tools you can ; lose no time, and may God bless your work!"

Pater Ambrosius also dismounted. With simple faith he brought out the sacred vessel from under his cassock, and holding it high above his head, so that all might partake of the divine blessing, he reverently prayed for God's help in this terrible emergency.

In a few moments the fresh band of willing workers had dispersed within the fields, and soon, from afar, could be heard the sound of the sharp scythes cutting through the tough stems of the maize.

Bideskúty, from where he stood, could see the row of backs stooping to their work, tearing and cutting, without rest and pause. They had pushed their way very near the fire : dangerously near, Bideskúty thought ; it seemed as if they were anxious even to risk their lives now, to save a few acres of land for him, to court danger so as better to show their

obedience and devotion. And yet, surely, the guilty were there too, amongst them, wrestling hard with that merciless fire which their criminal hand had kindled. Bideskùty looked with a feeling that was akin to envy at the sturdy peasant by his side who, with a word, had subdued all those recalcitrant hearts to his will. He would have wished to speak to him of his gratitude for the incalculable service rendered, but, somehow, the ruling passion still choked the words within his throat. The proud aristocrat could not bring himself, even at a moment like this, to own himself bounden in any way to the low-born peasant at his side.

There was no doubt that, almost imperceptibly, the area of the fire was being restricted. Already to the south and east the arid plain and the wide high-road had proved an insurmountable barrier to the spreading of the flames in those two directions, whilst to the north, the group of outlying stables, deluged with water, had proved an effectual check. Hope began to revive in Bideskùty's heart, as he saw the great bare patches in his fields of maize, against which every column of flame, which threatened to spread in the direction of the house, first flickered and then died. Pater Ambrosius had never ceased his prayers while the men worked and Bideskùty watched. The proud lord had allowed András, without a word of protest, to take command in the work of rescue.

The young peasant seemed to Bideskùty's feverish eyes to be in every place at the same time—now close to the men to direct their work, now at the park gates to send reassuring messages to the ladies within. For five hours the struggle went on between man and the element, and, inch by inch, the element was made to yield. Everywhere now could be seen black and

smoky patches which looked like desolate islands in a sea of flames. The intense glow had subsided. Darkness, which seemed doubly dense owing to the lurid illumination of a few hours ago, had overspread two-thirds of the horizon. The vanquished foe made one or two attempts at regaining lost ground ; in one or two places the stubble of cut maize stems caught fire and smouldered for a while, but, after the work of cutting down, the stamping out of those smouldering remnants was quick and effectual. As the flames had subsided, the mummers had joined forces with the peasants, and soon the barrier, which forced the fire back and back, became closer and closer. Bideskûty never left the ground while there was a single spark to be seen ; unceasingly he watched, while his terrible enemy was being driven back and vanquished. He felt no fatigue ; he watched as in a dream ; not seeking, in the gathering gloom, to note the fearful devastation which now stretched before him, where, yesterday, rich corn and maize fields had nodded gaily in the summer breeze.

He asked no questions as to the fate of his vineyards, which lay to the north, his turnip fields, his oats, which stretched for many leagues away, and of which he could not as yet know how far they had suffered from the fury of the flames.

In the east beyond the plain, a faint streak of delicate rosy grey broke the gathering gloom. The air was filled with choking smoke. Ahead a group of peasants and mummers, rendered doubly grotesque by begrimed faces and hands and torn finery, were stamping out the last remaining sparks on his dearly-loved maize fields which had been the pride of the county. He thanked God that he could not see the wreck, that he could put off till the morrow the thought of the hopeless ruin of

his rich crops, and to-night only remember that at least his house had been spared him, some of his beasts too, perhaps.

From a distance he could hear those now being driven back to their stables. He would not ask how many had perished, suffocated by fire and smoke. All that he would hear soon enough . . . to-morrow . . . To-night he thought he only wanted rest. A great many of the peasants, he noticed, were wending their way once more towards Árokszállás. The streak of rosy grey was getting wider, and brighter; even through the smoke he could see overhead a few stars, looking pale and shy at the approach of dawn. Pater Ambrosius said many kind words to him, and each peasant, as he passed, touched his *süveg* (cap) respectfully before the ruined lord.

"Gyuri, won't you come in?" said portly Count Kantássy very gently and very kindly; "you must be worn out with fatigue and anxiety. I have just come from the château, and have persuaded the ladies to go to bed."

Bideskúty looked at his old friend vacantly; he did not quite grasp his meaning. His mind was numb, as his body was, from the strain and the fatigue of the night.

"There seems no more danger for the present, but pickets of watchers have been placed at different points to give the alarm in case the fire should break out again."

Bideskúty hardly knew who had spoken. It was a young man, who looked exceedingly comic in a limp satin skirt, saturated with water, and a bodice, cut *décolleté* in front, with lace frills and bows of ribbons. It made him laugh so much that he tottered and almost

fell but for Kantásky's arm, which supported him gently, just as if he had been drinking and could not stand. The portly old Count tried to lead his friend away.

"Come, Gyuri, there is no occasion for you to stay!"

But, though he was very tired, and it was surely time for bed, Bideskúty felt that there was something he ought to do before going in, but he could not recollect what it was. Obstinate he refused to move, and stared with a vacant smile at the group of his young guests in limp, wet rags, the remnants of the merry masquerading which had made him laugh so heartily . . . oh! ever so long ago.

A servant came running from the park gates. She said that the Countess begged my lord would come in, as she and Mademoiselle Ilonka could not rest till they had seen him.

Bideskúty at last prepared to go.

"The Countess asked my lord to bring Kemény András of Kisfalú in with him," added the maid, "for she wished to speak a few words of thanks to him for his timely assistance."

Then it was that Bideskúty recollected what it was he wanted to do before going home to bed. There had been a man who had not only toiled and slaved for him, helped to rescue his home from utter devastation, but had also induced others to give able and willing help, so as to render his ruin only partial instead of whole. That man was a low-born peasant, descendant of a race of serfs, moreover a usurious money-lender, with Jewish ancestry; only that very afternoon he had been insolent and Bideskúty had been forced to chastise him. Still, quarrels must be forgotten, as the man had truly made amends, and Bideskúty felt sincerely grateful.

He turned to seek for András among the group which surrounded him. The peasant was not there. He asked after him, and called for him by name.

But Kemény András was gone.

PART II



CHAPTER XVI

EASTER MORN

"It is going to leave off!"

"Not to-day yet, I think!"

"I tell you not a drop has fallen for the last ten minutes."

"And look at that break in the clouds!"

"Hey! that won't last; they will soon close up again."

"I have felt a drop."

"You are dreaming, Laczi; why, I can see a bit of blue!"

"Where?"

"Right over Kisfalu. I tell you we shall have no more rain to-day."

He who had last spoken was evidently a man of much weight in matters connected with rain and sunshine, for the young men who stood round him, anxiously surveying the clouded horizon, ventured no further direct contradiction, although one voice tremblingly suggested:

"You know, Berczi, last Sunday, you said the rain would leave off before Pater Ambrosius had said the 'Ite Missa est,' and, when we came out of church, after the palms had been blessed, it was still raining; and has never left off till this moment."

"Hey! but it has left off now, has n't it?" repeated Vas Berczi obstinately, "or are you still getting wet, Laczi my boy?" he added with withering sarcasm.

Truly it seemed as if the weather prophet was speaking words of wisdom, to-day. Undoubtedly the break in the clouds was getting wider, and the bit of sky which was visible beyond that break was unquestionably of the brightest blue, whilst a very timid and pale ray of sun endeavoured to peep through at the melancholy landscape below.

"The first bit of sun we have seen for a fortnight, my children," said old Berczi, lifting his cap with mock solemnity; "hats off to the stranger!"

Laughingly the group of young peasants took off their hats, and, clapping their heels together, made a solemn bow towards the sun.

"God has brought you!" they all said politely.

"My lord Sun, you are welcome!"

"We hope your worship has come to stay!"

"Hey!" added old Berczi with a sigh, "it is a sad sight your Honour has come to see!"

"Was there ever so much mud on the mainroad as there is just now?" commented one of the peasants with a shake of the head.

"No cart can get through, and yesterday my oxen were up to their knees in mud. I could not get them either to turn or to go on. I thought our last hour had come, for I felt myself sinking deeper and deeper, and thought I and the oxen would reach hell that way, through the mud, without a chance of confession or prayer."

"I don't see how Kemény András will contrive to come to church this morning."

"He has good horses ; he will come on Csillag's back, and bring Etelka behind him."

"She will never miss Easter Sunday Mass, I know. Etelka is very pious."

"And András won't let her come alone."

"Have you noticed, my children," said the wise elderly prophet, "that András has not been himself lately?"

"He does seem so quiet," said Laczi, "I don't know when I have heard him laugh."

"Depend on it," whispered an older peasant among the crowd, "he has not yet forgiven us about that fire."

"András is not one to bear ill-will," asserted a younger man hotly ; "he has never spoken a word about that fire since it happened."

"You cannot deny," said old Berci, "that it is since the night of the fire that he has seemed so strange and silent."

"He is perhaps anxious about his new crops. We finished sowing at Kisfalu just before this cursed rain began."

"His fields are safe enough from the floods."

"There are only a few maize fields belonging to Kisfalu which lie close to the Tarna. He has not suffered much yet."

"The waters are still rising."

"The roar was terrific last night, and I went as far as my lord's stables yesterday ; it seemed to me as if all Bideskút lay under water."

"My lord is indeed unfortunate !"

"God punishes him, you see. We need not have set fire to his wheat last year. God will see Himself that none of it goes to be ground inside that mill of Satan."

The group of peasants were standing outside the village church, all in their Sunday best, waiting for their mothers, sisters, sweethearts, who took a long time this morning to put on their gorgeous finery for Easter morn. The sun had evidently come to stay; it was shining quite brightly on the scene that since the last fortnight had been indeed truly desolate. The rain had been incessant; since fourteen days and fourteen nights the patter of heavy drops, as they fell, had disturbed the peaceful immensity of the plain, and changed the entire landscape into a sea of mud. Far ahead towards the north could be heard the melancholy roar of the Tarna, as her angry waters, swollen by the continuous rain, dashed furiously onwards, overflowing their shallow banks, and submerging in their muddy depths the rich fields of Bideskút, newly sown with the early spring seed.

"Here come the men from Kisfalu," said Laczi, pointing towards the road; "they are well covered with mud."

"The girls have made themselves smart, nevertheless," said one of the younger men, looking admiringly towards the group of pretty girls in bright-coloured petticoats, who were coming up the village street.

"Sári and Kati have each a pair of new red boots!"

"András gave them, I know. He drove into Gyöngyös, just before the sowing, and bought his mother a new silk dress, and both his servants a pair of red boots."

"That man is made of money," sighed old Berci, envyingly.

"He makes good use of it, anyhow," said another; "during the whole of this winter he paid my mother her full wages for picking wheat, though her eyesight

now is quite gone, and she cannot tell cornflower seed from the finest lowland corn."

"It is easy to do good," said old Berczi, sententially, "if one has plenty."

"Not so easy, evidently," said one of the younger men; "my lord anyhow finds it more difficult than András. He gave mighty little away this winter, I know."

"My lord had mighty little to give away. His entire crops were destroyed in the fire, remember, and a great many of his beasts perished."

"There would have been no fire if he had not set up that mill of Satan, which was to deprive us of wage, while the devil did the work," asserted Laczi hotly.

The group from Kisfalu had in the meanwhile managed to wade through the muddy streets, and from the distance already shouted greetings to their friends at the church porch. There was a remarkable air of well-being and prosperity among the peasantry in this tiny lowland village; the men looked handsome in their fine white lawn shirts and trousers, very full, and finely tucked and hemmed, their short leather jackets handsomely embroidered, and broad belts with great brass bosses that glittered in the pale sun, the huge "bunda" (sheepskin mantles) down their backs giving dignity to their not very tall figures. They were a sturdy lot, too; broad-shouldered, and well planted on small arched feet encased in the shiniest of leather boots, with high heels and spurs, which jingled as they walked. As for the girls, there surely could not be found in any other county in Hungary such bright eyes, such white arms, such pretty little feet; nor could in any other village be mustered such a number of coloured petticoats round the waist of any one

girl. There were Sári and Kati now, not to speak of scores of others, who could, this Easter morn, not have had less than thirty petticoats one over the other, which made their hips look so large and their waist so small that one felt an irresistible longing to put an arm right round it. Their tiny feet were covered in mud, for it was a long walk from Kisfalu, but in their hands they proudly carried the shiny pair of new red leather boots, the joy and delight of every girl on the lowlands. No girl who owns red boots would allow them to get bespattered in the mud ; she carries them carefully to church with her prayer-book and best handkerchief, and only puts them on outside the porch, so as to walk up the aisle in them, to the envy of her less fortunate friends who can only afford black boots.

From every cottage door now they come tripping out, this bevy of pretty girls dressed out in Sunday finery, with great lawn sleeves puffed and starched, and bows of national colors, red, white, and green, fluttering in the wind. The graceful pártá, tied at the nape of the neck with a gigantic bow, sets off to perfection the tiny queen-like head, with sleek hair falling in two heavy plaits down the back ; the shift gaily embroidered in front, and the corselet laced tightly across the slim waist above the numberless petticoats, which swing gaily as the girls walk, with a peculiar rolling gait from the hips ; the large gold earrings, the many rows of beads, the bright clasps of the corselet, all glitter in the sunshine, no less than the bright eyes and the row of snow-white teeth. The older women are in more sombre dresses, and taller pártas, with bright-coloured shawls to hide their shoulders, and all carry ponderous prayer-books with gigantic clasps of brass or silver.

At the church porch greetings and blessings are exchanged, while the women squat down on the flag-stones to put on the beautiful boots over the little muddy feet.

Pater Ambrosius has not come yet, and already the little bell is sending forth, in merry peals, invitations to the simple flock to rejoice and worship on this bright Easter morn. Some of the women have gone in, to get a good seat in the rough oak pew, from which they can catch sight of my lord and his family, in their great pew above; for my lord always comes to Mass in the village church on Easter Sunday, and brings his lamb and eggs to be blessed by the reverend Pater.

Outside there is ceaseless chatter. The gossip continues while from every side the worshippers arrive.

"Will my lord come?" asks one of the late arrivals.

"He came last year, but I don't know if he will come to-day," said a young herdsman from Bideskút; "the carriage and horses were waiting when I passed the big house, so I am sure the Countess and the young lady will come."

"The noble Ilonka is very beautiful," suggested a pretty girl who was putting on her red boots.

"Not half so pretty in my eyes as you, Panna," whispered a young swain quickly in her ear.

"Help me up, Rezső, and don't talk nonsense; I am sure the noble Ilonka is just like the picture of the holy Virgin over the altar."

"And you are like nothing, and nobody, Panna, for there is no one with eyes as bright as yours," said the young man as he helped the idol of his heart to her feet, and in the effort managed to steal a kiss on her round white shoulders.

"Reszö, you know I have forbidden you to kiss me," she said with a frown.

"That is why I like to do it, my soul ; what fun would there be in kissing the girls, if they would let you?"

"I shall not dance the csárdás with you unless you promise not to kiss me."

"I won't kiss you while your mother is looking," he whispered, "but what about afterwards?"

"Hush!" she said blushing, "here comes my lord's carriage. I must run in, or I shall not get a good seat."

"And here, at last, is Kemény András!" came from one or two cheerful voices among the men.

The prophecy had proved correct ; András had relied on Csillag to bring him through the muddy roads, and Etelka also came, mounted on one of the sure-footed horses from her son's stables.

The young peasant was greeted with many shouts of "Isten hozta" (God has brought you!), and twenty pairs of willing hands were ready to help Etelka off her saddle. While András tethered Csillag and her companion to a tree, the carriage from Bideskrút, drawn by four black horses with scarlet harness and brass bosses, had driven up to the church porch. Respectfully the peasants stood aside while the Countess stepped out in her rustling silk gown, followed by Ilonka in a dainty muslin frock.

The Countess Irma looked very pale and worn; there were a good many more lines in the still handsome face, and round the proud, disdainful mouth, than there had been a year ago ; she sailed past the peasants, acknowledging their respectful greetings, like a very queen amongst her vassals. Ilonka, as bright

and merry as ever, was smiling to all like a gay child. Evidently care had not reached her ; what anxiety her mother and father had had to suffer since the terrible catastrophe, some eight months ago, they had done it without allowing her to dream that there was ought but sunshine in her life.

At the door of the church András stood, holding his mother by the hand ; they, too, stepped aside as the Countess crossed the porch, and Etelka suddenly felt that her son's hand, which held her own, trembled like an aspen leaf. She looked up at him and saw that in his eyes, which were fixed on the two noble ladies before him, there was a look of such wistful tenderness, and yet of such hopeless longing, that her motherly heart ached within her for this son whose sorrow she scarcely understood.

The Countess Irma had also caught sight of András, and had acknowledged his greeting, but when she was quite close to him she stopped for an instant. It seemed as if she were fighting with herself some inward battle, the victory of which was hard to gain. Then, as if with sudden resolution, she turned to the young peasant and said :

“The lord of Bideskút desired me to say that he would speak with you, if you will honour him by breaking bread with him, after Mass to-day.”

Ilonka had also stopped beside her mother, and her great blue eyes were looking curiously at the handsome young peasant, who looked so imposing in his magnificent mantle, all gorgeously embroidered, with the rich silver clasps in his belt, and jacket, and the long sweeping heron's feather that adorned the cap which he had respectfully taken off in reply to the Countess's commands.

"I will attend upon my lord," he said with a bow. The next moment the Countess and Ilonka had disappeared inside the church.

Pater Ambrosius was also coming, holding his cassock high above his lean shanks, to protect it from the mud. Every one filed into the little church, the women to the right, the men to the left. After the first glance of curiosity at the noble ladies, all heads were reverently bent down, waiting for the Pater to commence. The gentle old priest, in simple vestments, worn threadbare with age, had entered, carrying the sacred vessels, and every one knelt for the beginning of the Mass, and the recitation of the "Confiteor." The younger folk followed the Latin text in their prayer-books, but most of the older people, to whom all kinds of printing were still a mystery, quietly told their beads in a droning voice, which formed a quaint accompaniment to Pater Ambrosius' half audible prayers.

In respectful silence the pious, simple folk listened to the words prescribed by the Church, not understanding their meaning, but content that they must please God, since Pater Ambrosius said them, who was so good and so learned, and since their fathers and grandfathers and many generations before them had worshipped in this church, in this self-same way. Now and then a loudly intoned "*Per omnia sæcula sæculorum*" broke the peaceful stillness of the service, responded to by the schoolmaster's little droning harmonium, and his "Amen," sung in a high-pitched tremolo. Otherwise all was reverently silent. The pale rays of the sun peeped in now and then, through the tiny windows, at the simple group of worshippers, and from afar could be heard the melancholy roaring

of the flood, like distant, subdued thunder, incessant and gloomy.

Then the little bell, rung by the acolyte, announced the real bodily approach of God within the village church. Reverently all knelt down, and humble heads were bent to worship the Saviour, who, at a word from Pater Ambrosius, left His glorious heaven to come and sit inside that white bit of wafer, which the reverend Pater held between his fingers. A silence full of religious awe reigned, and, when the little bell had ceased to tingle, few heads dared as yet to look towards the altar where God now truly sat enthroned.

Etelka, during the Mass, often looked across at her son, who knelt close to one of the stone pillars on the left; and she saw that, all through divine worship, his eyes, dark and dreamy, were fixed in one direction, which was not the altar; that he held his arms tightly crossed over his chest, and that once during the service, when a pale ray of sun came creeping through one of the tiny windows, and rested on a head of golden curls, bent reverently over the prayer-book, a tear found its way in his eyes, and trickled slowly down his bronzed cheeks. Etelka noticed that he did not pray, that he only gazed in that one direction, with a look so wistful and so yearning that she also felt her own eyes fill with tears.

Pater Ambrosius had intoned "Ite! Missa est!" One by one the little congregation began to file out, in order to assemble outside the church where, beneath the great overhanging acacias, a table was spread with a snow-white cloth, and laden with quarters of newly-killed lamb, eggs, butter, cheese, and fresh-cured ham, awaiting the blessing of the Church.

One of the shares of the good fruits of this bountiful

earth was for the kind Pater himself, and the few poor and aged whose time for work had passed. Proudly each thrifty housewife compared her own eggs with those of her neighbours, noted the whiteness of her cheese, the creaminess of her butter. In the centre, on a huge silver dish, was a young lamb, roasted whole, which my lord had sent to be blessed; and all along, in more humble earthenware platters, and in baskets plaited of rush, were the coloured eggs, and smaller products from the more modest cottages.

The small congregation had filed into the churchyard, and, in spite of mud and damp, all had knelt down to hear the touching prayer that would bring God's blessing upon the first-fruits of the earth. A rug had been spread in the centre for the Countess and Ilonka, and all round, in picturesque groups, knelt the pretty peasant girls and bronze-faced young men.

Pater Ambrosius stood behind the table, with hands outspread and reverent eyes lifted upwards, praying for grace. Near him a small acolyte swung the censer, throwing the sweet penetrating scent of myrrh and incense through the air. The sun had come out in its full glory, and its noonday rays drew a warm steam from the wet earth, and made each raindrop glitter on the grass mounds like so many diamonds. Far away the distant roar of the flood made a melancholy accompaniment to Pater Ambrosius' softly whispered prayer.

Having spread his hands over all the things placed before him, the reverend Pater asked God to bless these, the first-fruits of the earth, and, when he had finished, he sprinkled each basket of eggs, each quarter of lamb, with holy water, and swung the censer over them. His kind old face was full of reverence; in

true gratitude he thanked the Creator for the plentiful produce of this happy land. When the last prayer had been said, and all had repeated "Amen," the priest addressed his flock once again :

" My children," he said, " now that we have thanked God for all the good things He gives us, and asked His special blessing on the first spring fruits of the earth, I want you to join me in a fervent prayer to our Heavenly Father that He may in His mercy stay His wrath from our beloved county of Heves, and command the waters of the Tarna to return to their banks. We must pray to God to stay the catastrophe which brings such sorrow upon the lord of Bideskút, Kisfalu, and Zárda, who already has had so much grief last year, when a terrible fire devastated his land. Let us all say from our hearts ' Our Father,' and three times ' Hail, Mary ' and then the Holy Virgin will truly intercede with her divine Son for the noble lord."

The simple prayers were repeated devoutly as Pater Ambrosius requested, for all felt truly sorry in their hearts to see the beautiful land devastated by the flood ; and the two noble ladies looked so sad during Mass, it seemed hard they should suffer for follies which they could not help. The Countess had frowned when she heard Pater Ambrosius' exhortation. Her pride rebelled against the touching appeal made on her behalf by these simple folk whom she despised ; she did not care to own, even before her God, that calamity would dare to touch the aristocratic house of Bideskút.

As for András, he joined with all his heart in the simple prayers ; he—alone of all those present—guessed more accurately the magnitude of the disaster which had fallen on the lord of Bideskút by the terrible flood, and in simple faith he prayed that this disaster would

touch but lightly on that dainty head, which was only created for merriment.

The last "Amen" had died away; Pater Ambrosius had retired within the church to take off his vestments. All had risen to their feet and stood gossiping about, in whispers, out of respect for the two noble ladies who were waiting for their carriage. Etelka had drawn near to her son; vaguely, she felt anxious about him, for the line of some hidden suffering seemed more accentuated on his face, and once or twice she had heard like an involuntary sigh, as if the burden on his heart was more than he could bear. The Countess had not condescended to speak to him again. She had stepped into her carriage, followed by Ilonka, and driven off, leaving András to come on as he pleased. Her husband had desired to speak with the peasant; that was quite sufficient honour for him, without further words from the noble Countess.

"You will not stay and eat that man's bread, my son?" asked Etelka, anxiously.

"Never fear, mother," replied András, "I will see what he wants and be home before Sári and Kati have laid our mid-day meal. You must walk Dándar along the road. It is safer for you when I am not there."

He had passed his hand over his eyes, as if wishing to chase away some persistent dream. Then he kissed his mother, and placed her in her saddle. Sári and Kati, carrying their red boots, walked each side of the horse, and Kemény András stood watching the three women until they were out of sight.

The people had all left the churchyard. One or two pretty girls looked wistfully after the rich peasant who was so moody to-day. Gradually the little church porch and then the village street had become deserted;

all had gone in to eat the meat and eggs which had been specially blessed by God. In the distance, Pater Ambrosius, his cassock well tucked up, was hurrying home to his presbytery ; from every half-opened cottage door could be heard loud peals of laughter, and, lingering in the churchyard, András spied two or three couples exchanging kisses. Overhead he could hear the melancholy cry of the storks just home from warmer climes, and seeking for the nest they deserted last year ; everything spoke of merriness, of home, of youth and love, and András, with a sigh, turned towards Csillag and kissed the pretty creature between her great, gentle eyes.

CHAPTER XVII

THE RUINED LORD

IT was with a beating heart that András once again crossed the threshold of that house where his pride had received so bitter a blow. He had never entered it since the day when a girlish face had stayed his vengeful hand, ready to return blow for blow. And now he wondered what the arrogant lord would have to say to him. That it was something of serious import was, of course, evident, or the Countess would never have stooped to address him ; András guessed that my lord had some request to make to him, which his pride had probably put off from day to day for some time, till now it had become imperative.

Jankó had been waiting for András at the gates ; another servant took charge of Csillag, while the old valet led the young peasant to that same room where the stormy interview had lately taken place.

The lord of Bideskút was sitting there, smoking, when Jankó opened the door to let András come in ; but the peasant noticed that as he entered this time the noble lord took the pipe out of his mouth, and said, "Isten hozta !" (God has brought you !) while pointing to a chair.

András saw how very much altered Bideskúty was since last year. He seemed altogether aged, though his hair was no greyer nor his stature less upright, but

his geniality seemed gone ; there was an air of seriousness, of care, round the eyes, and one or two deep lines were very apparent between the brows. András felt exceedingly sorry for this man, who seemed to have suffered so much for his folly.

"It is kind of you to come," began Bideskúty a little nervously.

"I am here at your lordship's command ; with what can I be of service ?"

"You will have guessed by hearing the Tarna roaring out there, over my fields."

"I know that your lordship is suffering a heavy loss, as already you did last year. I do not remember so terrible a flood since I was a boy."

"The loss to me is greater than you think."

"I am a farmer, my lord," said András simply ; I know the value of every acre upon the lowland."

Bideskúty thought that the peasant purposely evaded giving him an opening for what he wanted to say. Never in all his life had he felt so absolutely at a loss of how to begin ; he had never asked any one anything, and now he was compelled to do it of a man whom he despised as utterly beneath him, and yet whom, somehow, he could not manage to treat in the same way as he did Rosenstein the Jew.

András waited quietly while Bideskúty mopped his forehead and drew great clouds of smoke from his pipe.

"Have you suffered much, over at Kisfalu ?" he asked at last.

"As your Honour knows, there are very few fields in that direction belonging to Kisfalu ; some of my maize is under water, but it won't be a serious loss."

"You are always lucky !" said Bideskúty enviously.

"There are other sorrows besides the loss of corn," replied András quietly.

"That depends how much you lose," said Bideskúty with growing vehemence ; "if, like me, you were to see two successive crops entirely destroyed through no fault of your own, leaving you nothing, not even a handful of corn, to sow for the following year, what then? If, like me, you saw ruin staring you in the face, what then? If every league of your land is mortgaged to beyond its value, with interest to pay far beyond what it can produce, what then? If your very house, in which for seven hundred years every one of your ancestors were born and have died, is about to pass into strangers' hands? Then, Kemény András, are there sorrows that are harder to bear?"

"No, indeed, my lord," said András kindly, "but such a terrible state of things is, thank God, not your own. True, your land is heavily mortgaged ; no one knows that better than I ; but I am not threatening to close upon you, dearly as I should love to call that part of it on which I was born my own. You talk of interest," he added very gently, "but, however much you may have suffered in the two disasters, your land, thank God, still produces enough on which to feed yourself and your family and all your servants, and yet leave over a small surplus, which is but the just interest on the money you have had. As for this house, who threatens it? Surely not I. I hold no mortgage on it, and have already refused to take it as security, when I lent the money upon the Bideskút lands."

"You use many pretty phrases," said Bideskúty impatiently ; "just now you said you knew the value of every acre upon the lowland. Are you telling a lie, then, when you say that, on the few fields that do not

lie under water, I can grow enough wheat to pay you the hundreds of thousands of measures which you demand, and yet have enough with which to feed myself, and my family, and all my servants?"

"I am afraid your Honour is but a poor calculator; the measures of wheat which you pay me annually for the loan of the 850,000 florins I lent you, altogether, do not amount to more than twenty thousand and——"

"It is you who is a poor calculator" rejoined Bideskúty, "for I pay more than ten times that amount, which with the thousands of beasts——"

"My lord," said András quietly, "do not let us wander any further into these fantastic lands. I receive from your lordship in kind as interest for my money what does not amount to more than three or four florins a year for every hundred I lent. You yourself signed the paper which I hold in my pocket; what I asked was more than fair, it was liberal; had I exacted the usurious interest you speak of, I could long ago have forced you to part with Kisfalu, to own which is the dream of my life. But I do not understand usury, and that is why I am still the 'bérlő' (tenant) and not the owner of the land."

"Not understand usury, man?" said Bideskúty in a rage; are you drunk or mad? Am I dreaming, or are you telling lies? Does not that blood-sucking Jew bailiff of yours exact from me every year what now amounts to nearly two hundred thousand measures of wheat, some four hundred head of my best cattle, a thousand sheep and lambs, my fattest geese and poultry, and, in your name, give me neither rest nor respite? coming down upon me a little more than a week after that terrible fire, exacting the few poor beasts that had escaped from the flames, threatening

me with the demand for the capital, unless I parted with the few stacks of corn left me by the cursed incendiaries, my only chance of sowing for the following year ; and then actually offering me that self-same corn at an outrageous price, and offering to lend me the money with which to buy it, at usury worse than the last."

Exhausted, the unfortunate man had sunk down in his chair, burying his face in his hands. Forgotten were his pride, his arrogance, when looking his own folly, his probable ruin, in the face ; it all seemed so hopeless, he felt like some wretched bird ensnared in a net, fighting against meshes which closed in on every side. András had become deathly pale ; at first he had listened to the ravings of Bideskúty as he would to those of a lunatic. But gradually he realised in the man's broken accents, in his voice choked with sobs half of anger and half of appeal, that he was telling the bitter truth ; he dimly felt that some terrible wrong had been committed, of which this foolish man had been the victim, a wrong committed in his name—Kemény András—he who had worshipped his own integrity as he would a god.

Trembling, his hand sought the papers which bore Bideskúty's signature ; his eyes scanned the writing anxiously, as if in a vain desire to make them yield part of that hideous mystery.

"My lord," he said as quietly as possible, after a long pause, "I do not think that we quite understand one another. That there is here some ugly mystery, of which Rosenstein has the key, seems to me evident ; shall we try to understand each other first, before we make him tell us his share of the riddle ?"

Bideskúty had succeeded in once more mastering

himself. He saw his creditor's face, looking so kindly, so honestly, at him that, for once in his life, his heart whispered to him to put his pride in his pocket, to trust that man whom he affected to despise, and with a frank gesture he stretched his hand out towards him.

András placed his own in it ; then he said :

" Will your lordship tell me, as clearly as you can, what you believe to be your debt towards me ? "

" I could not tell you within a good many measures of wheat, but I know that you lent me altogether 950,000 florins. "

" No, my lord, only 850,000 florins. "

" There were four loans altogether. "

" Only three. "

" Three hundred thousand on Kisfalu ; 300,000 on the lands of Bideskút, 250,000 on Zárda, and 100,000 on this house, the gardens and stables, and all its adjoining buildings. "

" This last loan I never made ; it was no money of mine. When did your Honour borrow it ? "

" Two days after the fire, last September. "

" Did Rosenstein say the money came from me ? "

" Jews, whenever they lend money, always protest their own poverty, and speak of a friend who is rich and is the real lender. When I originally borrowed of Rosenstein, I did not believe that story. Later on . . . you told me that it was your money I was borrowing . . . I never inquired further after that. "

" I understand. Will your Honour continue ? "

" I do not know exactly how much money interest I have agreed to pay. That dirty Jew always made me sign a paper ; as if the word of a Hungarian nobleman was not as good as any paper. "

"These papers I have here," said András, "is this your lordship's signature?"

Bideskúty glanced at the papers which Kemény was holding towards him.

"Yes," he said, "that is my writing."

"Does your lordship at all remember the amount of the interest you agreed to pay?"

"Not exactly . . . but——"

"Was it at all like this?" said András, beginning to read from the paper, "I owe you 300,000 florins in gold. For this, until I repay it in full, I promise to pay you interest every year, one hundred head of cattle, of which there shall be ten bulls and ninety cows, and five thousand hectolitres of wheat——"

Bideskúty shook his head.

"On that first loan I have paid now every year, since over five years, fifty thousand measures of wheat, some two hundred head of cattle and sheep, and I don't know how much poultry."

"But why did your lordship do it, when you only agreed to pay five thousand measures of wheat, and a hundred head of cattle?"

"I tell you, man, that from the first Rosenstein demanded usurious interest in the name of his friend, who I supposed was yourself; that he would not let me have the money without I signed his cursed papers, promising to pay his outrageous demands."

"Papers? Were there more than one?"

"I think I always signed two every time I received the money. I don't quite remember," said Bideskúty, with exasperating vagueness.

"But your lordship *must* have seen what you wrote; you *must* have read what you put your name to."

"May the devil get into the cursed things! I never read them, I tell you."

"Never read them?"

András was fairly staggered. In his careful, thrifty, peasant mind, such negligence was nothing short of criminal. Clearly the Jew had had an easy game with this careless, shiftless spendthrift, who seemed utterly ignorant of the value of all he was so casually signing away with a flourish of his pen, without deigning even to glance at that to which he had put his name. It seemed to András almost incredible, and just for a moment he doubted whether Bideskúty was not playing some game too deep for his peasant mind to fathom. But Bideskúty looked so puzzled himself, so wretched and hopeless, that András felt truly sorry for him.

"Then your lordship sent for me to-day——"

"To ask you if you cannot forego some of that interest," interrupted Bideskúty again nervously; "I thought you could easily do that without losing very much by it."

"Indeed, my lord, had I ever done so dishonourable a thing as to extort usury like that from you," said András with a smile, "I would well have deserved that blow on the head eight months ago, the scar of which I still bear. I see clearly now that that confounded Jew has used my money and my name to practise the most villainous usury upon you, and that—your lordship must pardon me for saying this—you have allowed yourself to be robbed in a most careless manner."

"What could I do? I wanted the money."

"Your lordship knows best what you wanted it for. No good has come of the money, and your lordship is suffering deeply for some unfortunate follies."

"You have no right to speak to me like that. I allow no one to condemn my actions. Certainly not such as you——"

"Do not let us quarrel again, noble lord," said András, who this time was determined not to lose his temper, "but rather let us see which way it will be best for me to help your Honour. I can, of course, get the other papers out of the hands of that cursed Jew, those, I mean, which deal with loans I actually did make."

"What will you do with them?" asked Bideskúty, still suspiciously.

"Destroy them," replied András simply. "Unfortunately it is not in my power to force Rosenstein to give you back all that he has extorted from you. I can thrash him to within an inch of his life," he added, "but that would do no good."

"All that is not the worst," said Bideskúty with a sigh; "what is gone is gone. I can pay neither interest nor principal of that last loan; the delay you and Rosenstein have granted me expires this week; I have not a groat in the world; my best land is under water, my beasts have not yet recovered from the fearful shock and terrors of that awful night in September, and my beautiful house of Bideskút, where I was born and had hoped to die, will fall into the hands of a stranger—yours—Rosenstein's——" added the poor man ready again to break down. "What difference does it make to me whether it is Jew or peasant that drives me from my home?"

"Your lordship does not remember what you signed, in connection with the loan on this house?"

"I tell you, man, I never read what I signed!"

"Yes, I know," said András with an impatient sigh, "but you must have some sort of an idea as to

what money you are actually owing at this moment upon that one loan and the interest."

"I know that the money I had was 100,000 florins, that there is some outrageous interest due on it, of which I have not paid one measure of wheat or one head of cattle; and that with my early crops under water, I see absolutely no chance of ever paying, neither that, nor anything I owe you."

"We will talk about your debt to me later on, when we have satisfied Rosenstein, and made your house secure from his clutches. I have not the money with me to-day, but I will see him to-morrow, and have a look at all the papers he holds. We can both only pray, my lord, that I shall be able to buy them at a reasonable figure. I am not made of money," added András, smiling, "as your Honour has often said; thank God, however, I have enough yet to let you be in my debt, with regard to the house, instead of in the Jew's, and I can assure your lordship that I will never be hard upon you in the matter of the interest."

Bideskúty seemed hardly to realise the enormous service which the young peasant was thus quietly offering to render him. For the last few months his situation had appeared to him so hopeless, he had brooded so deeply and so darkly over his inevitable ruin, that the glimmer of hope which this man so unostentatiously held out to him appeared too faint to penetrate through the dreary veil of his misery.

"Whatever interest you wanted," he said, dejectedly, "I could not pay you, while fire and water fight alternately against me."

"I told your lordship that I would not be hard."

"Do you wish to humiliate me by conferring favours upon me?" said Bideskúty, fretfully.

"I have no wish to humiliate any one, being only a peasant myself," said András with a pride which at least equalled Bideskúty's own, as he drew up his tall figure to the full height, and looked the lord of Bideskút straight in the face. "Your lordship has asked me to help you. You know best if you can accept the only help I can suggest without losing your dignity."

"Thinking you were my creditor, I only asked for time. I do not see why you should part with your money to help me."

"I am a single man, my lord," said András, with inexpressible sadness, "my dear mother and I have enough to feed ourselves and all those who ask us to feed them; I have no desire to save, and we must all try to help one another on this beautiful lowland of ours, so that it remains fruitful and prosperous, such as God created it."

Bideskúty had rested his elbow on the table, and hidden his face in his hands, so that the peasant could not see how deeply he felt his present position, how humbled he really was in his pride at being so absolutely bounden to one beneath him, to one who was quietly giving him the most serious lesson he had ever had in his life. He felt very like a chidden child, still obstinately shutting his eyes to the fact that nothing but his own folly had brought him to the verge of ruin, and looking on all his misfortunes as the relentless hand of fate.

There was a long silence between the two men; András waited till Bideskúty had composed himself, and after a while he said:

"Have I your lordship's permission to see Rosenstein to-morrow?"

"Yes! . . . Yes!" said Bideskúty, hurriedly; "I am grateful to you, friend . . . yes, very grateful, . . . and . . . you need not fear . . . I will repay you all soon . . . very soon . . . you are placing your money on good security. . . . Next year my mill will be at work . . ."

"We can easily talk of that later on," said András, gently; "if your lordship will allow me, now I will go; my mother will be waiting for our Easter meal, and the roads are muddy towards Kisfalu."

"Oh! Ah! Yes! Yes!" added Bideskúty, nervously, "but . . . but . . . will you not . . . break the bread with us? . . . with me . . . I mean . . . for, of course, the Countess . . ."

András had looked with some amusement at the poor man struggling through this evidently most uncordial invitation. He was far too shrewd not to guess how unwelcome a guest he really would be at the noble lord's table, and far too proud to avail himself of Bideskúty's sense of obligation towards him. He had risen to his feet, and in his great mantle, with his tall, broad stature, he seemed to tower in his pride above the unfortunate nobleman, with his seven centuries of ancestry.

"I thank your Honour," he said, "but, if you will allow me, I will join my mother at our own mid-day meal. My two little servants would be sad to see my empty chair on Easter Sunday, and I would not like to be the cause of the noble Countess being forced to eat the blessed meats apart from her lord."

"Will you come to me after you have seen Rosenstein to-morrow?" asked Bideskúty, evidently much relieved.

"I will certainly bring you the papers at once. You

will be glad to see them destroyed," said András, preparing to take his leave.

For a moment Bideskúty hesitated. The guest who had come to the rescue when all seemed lost, and who had staved off the ruin which had been knocking at the door, was about to depart. Surely, the laws of hospitality demanded that he should be accompanied to the gates, that the stirrup-cup should be handed to him by his host before he rode away.

András readjusted his mantle over his broad shoulders, tightened his belt, took up his cap, and bowed to the lord of Bideskút. Gyuri again put out his hand, which the peasant grasped, after an imperceptible moment of hesitation—then, the next instant, he was gone, his steps echoing on the flagstones of the hall, and it was old Jankó who offered the peasant the stirrup-cup, which András refused; whilst from the room above, Bideskúty watched his creditor with a puzzled look on his face.

CHAPTER XVIII

ROSENSTEIN THE JEW

NOBODY knew in the village exactly how Rosenstein the Jew lived, and no one could really boast of ever having entered the small cottage in which he had lived for over a quarter of a century. He kept neither man nor maid, so must have done every kind of work for himself, from stewing his own "gulyás" to looking after his own chickens, of which he kept a few in the bit of garden at the back, and his cow, a beautiful milcher, from the Kisfalu herd, which he had bought from Kemény András. Every Saturday, however, old Róza, Darázs Laczi's mother, had to go and do his work for him; on that day, although he could not go to Synagogue, since there was no such place of worship nearer than the one at Gyöngyös, he kept his Sabbath most strictly, and remained all day indoors, doing absolutely nothing but take his meals, which Zsuzsi cooked for him, and to whom he gave ten kreutzer (about twopence) every Saturday for her trouble.

Kemény András looked with some doubt through the half-open door into that cottage on the following afternoon; it seemed so dark and close within. He knocked several times at the door before he heard a shuffling footstep across the room, and Rosenstein's husky voice asking who was there.

"It is I, Kemény András, Rosenstein, let me in! I wish to speak with you."

"My poor house is too much honoured," said the Jew, barring the way across the threshold; "if you desired to speak with me, I would have gone where you had bidden me."

"Let me in, man," said Kemény peremptorily, "what I have to say to you cannot be said at a way-side inn, or on the road, and my time is short."

Without waiting for the Jew's reply, András pushed him on one side and went in. He had to stoop as he crossed the threshold, for the doorway was low and heavy rafters supported the thatched roof. At first he could see nothing round him, for the tiny window was masked by an old coat, which was nailed across it, so as to entirely obstruct the daylight. The heat inside was overpowering, for there was a huge fire in the great earthenware oven, on which something, that was strongly flavoured with garlic, was simmering gently.

As András's eyes became accustomed to the darkness, he noticed a table in the middle of the room, of dark polished wood, on which were spread several papers. Before it a chair had apparently been hastily pushed aside. Otherwise the room appeared empty; at the farther end, a door led to an inner room, beyond which was the tiny garden, and a shed for the cow.

Rosenstein had hurriedly endeavoured to collect the papers scattered on the table.

"Leave those alone," said András, putting his hand over them, "I expect those papers are the ones about which I have come to speak to you. But take that rag from off the window; I must have some light."

"The villagers are so inquisitive, your Honour," protested Rosenstein, whose sallow cheeks had become of a pale ashen colour, as András, sitting on the edge of

the table, had picked up all the papers, and was preparing to look over them.

"I told you to let in more light," said the peasant, peremptorily. The Jew obeyed. For fully five minutes there was silence, during which time András quietly read each paper through, whilst Rosenstein watched anxiously every varying expression of his face as he read. When András had finished, he replaced the papers on the table.

"Do you remember," he asked quietly, "that some eight months ago I once told you that I would thrash your very life out of you, if ever I found you out trying to deceive me?"

"Your Honour—" began Rosenstein, protesting.

"I said, do you remember?" interrupted András, still very quietly.

There was no reply. The Jew looked frightened; once or twice he passed his tongue over his lips, which seemed parched, and his knees shook under him visibly, as he dropped into the chair.

"I have brought with me," resumed András, who was still sitting on the edge of the table, "the riding-whip with which I thrash my herdsmen if I catch any of them ill-using a dumb brute unnecessarily. I have only struck a beast once with it, and that was a pig which had turned savage and bitten a shepherd in the leg. To-day I shall use it upon you, because you have not only deceived me, and brought my good name to shame, but because you have cruelly and unnecessarily ill-used one who had done you no wrong, and brought him to the verge of ruin."

"Your Honour—" protested Rosenstein again.

"I have not done yet. When I have finished with the thrashing I intend to give you, you will hand over

to me the papers relating to the loan of 100,000 florins, which you made upon the house of Bideskút (which is not here among these papers on the table), in exchange for the sum of 105,000 florins which I shall hand over to you, this being at a fair rate of interest, upon the money you lent six months ago. As for these papers here, they are valueless, and when you have had your thrashing, we will destroy them."

András thereupon calmly took off his mantle, and drew from out his belt a short-handled whip of twisted leather.

Rosenstein was positively livid. Though he was well used to sundry thrashings from hot-tempered noble borrowers, there was a nasty look in András's eyes, which foretold that the present experience would be decidedly more unpleasant than any in the past. But the astute Jew was not a man to be taken unawares; no doubt, when he first entered upon the hazardous game, which he now stood a sad chance of losing, he had prepared for an eventuality like the present one. He knew that he would not always be able to keep creditor and debtor apart, and that, sooner or later, an unpleasant encounter with his rich employer would be the inevitable result.

"Your Honour," he said with absolute calm, whilst András cracked his whip through the air, "you think I have deceived you, and perhaps to a certain extent I have done so, but not quite so much as you think. I cannot save my poor old shoulders from your riding-whip, seeing that you have the advantage over me in point of strength and age, but, surely, if I have deserved a beating, you would not be cowardly enough to thrash me, who am weak, and let him who is strong, and far guiltier than I, go free."

"What is it to me, if some one else helped you in doing your lying, cheating trade? I have not had any dealings with other miscreants save you. But if it will ease your sore shoulders to see those of your accomplice smart—well! if you will name him to me, I promise you he shall not come off second best."

Rosenstein was quietly chuckling to himself, and looking at the young peasant from under his shaggy eyebrows, with a satirical smile playing upon his thin lips.

"Even if that accomplice is the lord of Bideskút, Kisfalu, and Zárda?" he asked. "Look here, your Honour," he added as András, puzzled, had paused a moment, giving the Jew a chance to speak, "I do not, of course, know with what lies the noble lord over at Bideskút has been stuffing you up; whatever they were, you have evidently believed them, and have come here thinking that I was the vilest thing on earth, only fit to be touched with the same whip with which you thrash your pigs. But when your Honour read books on law, and studied Latin with Pater Ambrosius, you must have learned also the good sound saying: that one man's tongue is good, till the other man's begins to wag. If your Honour desires to be just, you will hear me, and then decide whose shoulders are more worthy of your riding-whip."

It was obvious that András would listen, for he had folded his arms over his chest, and placed the whip on the table by his side.

"As I said before," resumed Rosenstein, whose voice now was perfectly assured and steady, "I do not know what stories your Honour has heard. I will tell it, such as it all really happened, the truth of which I swear by our forefather Abraham, by Isaac, Jacob, and

by Moses the lawgiver. The noble lord wanted some money, a great deal of money; your Honour perhaps has no idea how much went into that wonderful mill, which has never ground yet a thousand bushels of wheat. You were willing to lend his lordship what was more than a reasonable amount of money on the security of Kisfalu first, then of Bideskút, and finally of Zárda. I am a poor man, and no farmer, but I say it humbly that the money you lent was quite as much as the land was worth. But the most noble lord wanted more, a great deal more; his mill, his machinery, his improvements swallowed up the money you lent, and like the ogres children are frightened with, when they had swallowed all, they wanted more. The owner of Bideskút, Kisfalu, and Zárda had no more land to offer as security; I could not, as he wanted, ask your Honour to lend any more; I had some money put by. Is that a sin? . . . Your Honour's father put a couple of millions into a wine barrel. I sank mine into a Hungarian nobleman's bottomless pockets. . . . But, mind you, I had no security . . . only my lord's august name at the bottom of a piece of paper. . . . You understand these things . . . the worse the security . . . the heavier the interest. . . . I had no wish to part with my money, in order merely to gratify the whims of an arrogant, spendthrift lord. I had no cause to love him, for, whenever I refused to lend him all the money he wanted, he had me whipped by his lacqueys. . . . Once he forced me to break the laws of my religion, and stuffed pig's meat down my throat in order to make his kitchenmaids laugh. . . . No! I did not love him . . . but I lent him money . . . at interest . . . just interest . . . you must judge me rightly . . . and consider . . . I had no security."

Rosenstein had told this extraordinary tissue of falsehoods with perfect self-possession. All his nervousness had gone, and as he proceeded with his narrative, he wore such an air of truth, and the whole circumstances seemed so absolutely plausible, that András was fairly staggered. More and more puzzled, he tried to read the Jew's very thoughts beneath the mask of bland innocence he wore, and his honest mind refused to grasp the obvious fact that one of the two men—the lord or the Jew—was telling him a complete tissue of lies. Being simple and honest, he had a great desire to be just, and, in a matter of rectitude, both Jew and lord seemed to him to have an equal right to be believed.

Rosenstein, through his very calling in life, was accustomed to note every change in the human face. The young peasant's keen frank eyes were the very mirror of his mind within, and the Jew soon saw that his narrative had had a sufficient air of truth to have, at any rate, severely shaken András's conviction of his guilt.

"After all," he resumed after a pause, "I do not expect you to believe my words without proofs. Here are the papers relating to three loans which I made to my lord. They are signed 'Bideskúty Gyuri'; he will not deny his own signature; he cannot do it. . . . I do not know what lies he has told your Honour. A man who has no respect for religion can have no respect for truth . . . but he cannot deny his signature."

"He does not deny any signature, but he says you made him sign two papers, which he never read. He owns that he had the money, that he agreed to pay the usurious interest, set forth on your papers, but, although he does not deny that the signature at the

bottom of the papers which I hold is his, he says he knows nothing of their contents."

"And does your Honour, who knows something about business, really believe that a man would be fool enough to put his name to papers without knowing what they contain?" asked Rosenstein, with a shrug of the shoulders.

He had—perhaps unknown to himself—played his trump card here. There was no doubt that, to the peasant, the idea of Bideskúty professing not to have read the contents of the papers he had signed was absolutely preposterous; although, until he had spoken to Rosenstein, he had never actually discredited the noble lord's statement, now that it was jeered at by the Jew, it struck him again forcibly as shiftless beyond the bounds of possibility.

Once more he took up the papers that were lying on the table, and read them through very carefully, with a more and more puzzled air. They certainly bore out the Jew's statements to the full; although in them Bideskúty acknowledged the debt, and agreed to pay the usurious interest charged therein, there was no mention of any security whatsoever. Triumphant, the Jew watched his face.

"After the fire, your Honour, when my lord required more money, and I began to feel that perhaps my speculation was becoming hazardous, I exacted the house and grounds of Bideskút as security for the next loan. I was obliged to do that in my own interests, as a wholesome weapon over his head. Remember, it is all I have as security for the vast sums of money I have lent; whilst I hold that, I can enforce the payment of the interest on the other loans. I know the noble lord would not part with the house as long as he had a

quarter of wheat left which he could throw to me when I became pressing."

"I was prepared to take over the loan on the house," said András, "and brought the money with me to-day."

"How can your Honour suggest such a thing?" said Rosenstein with amazement. "If I part with that one security I hold, what chance have I, not only of ever seeing a florin of the principal, but of being able to enforce the payment of the interest? You hold Kisfalu, Bideskút, Zárda as security . . . what chance would I have?"

"If you seize the house of Bideskút and drive the noble lord and his family away from their home, you have no better chance of getting the remainder of your principal and interest, and, according to your statement, you will then have paid 950,000 florins for a house, a garden, a few stables, and two or three fields."

"The house is comfortable," said the Jew placidly. "I can live in it, if I like. I am a poor man, with simple tastes; the garden and the fields will yield me all I want."

"Why, man! the house will fall into ruin, if it is uninhabited. Ten years hence, unless you keep it in proper repair, your 950,000 florins will not fetch as many pence."

"Suppose, your Honour," said the Jew with slow emphasis, "that I am content to pay 950,000 florins for the pleasure of seeing that man a beggar, and without a home, the man who amused himself by seeing me whipped by his herdsmen, and by forcing pig's meat down my throat?"

András looked astonished, even awed, in spite of himself, by the tone of bitter, deadly hatred, which

made the words come out of the Jew's mouth like the hissing of a poisonous snake. Again there was a long pause. Kemény András was quite at a loss to know what to do. The whole thing nauseated him. So many lies had been told, there was so much greed, so much cupidity, so much hatred on one side, such hopeless thriftlessness on the other, that it seemed absolutely impossible to mediate with equal justice to both. There is no doubt that but for a fair, girlish vision, which, with provoking persistency, haunted his dreams, he would have left the careless, arrogant lord to his fate; but, before him, his fancy conjured up a pathetic picture of that curly head, bent down under a weight of sorrow, of those forget-me-not eyes dim with tears, of that sweet mouth lined with care, and perhaps want. . . .

Great God! such a vision, haunting him by day and by night, seen in the fitful light of the moon, or mirrored across the plain by the fairy Morgana, would drive him mad, and sap his manhood, his pride, reduce him to an imbecile visionary, the laughing-stock of the county of Heves. . . .

"Look here, Rosenstein," he said at last, "I am pledged to see justice done, in this unfortunate business. My lord's tale is very different from yours. . . ."

"I have the papers," repeated the Jew, obstinately.

"He denies any knowledge of them."

"Does he deny his signature?" persisted Rosenstein.

"No, he does not; but . . ."

"There is no *but*, your Honour; you must in all justice admit that. You have seen all the papers. Here," he added, taking another from his breast-pocket, "is the one relating to the last loan . . . the one on the house of Bideskút. . . . He promises to pay back the

principal and interest in six months; failing which I have the right to seize his house. There is no argument possible. I am within my rights; and your Honour cannot say I have wronged you in any way. Your money is perfectly secure; what he has agreed to pay you he can pay or not as he pleases; the land is well worth foreclosing on. . . . I have nothing but the house . . . the house I mean to have, unless the noble lord fulfils his engagements to me . . . which by his own signature he has agreed to do. 'This is my last word. . . . Your Honour is just. . . . Read the papers . . . you will see that I am within my rights.'

Unfortunately, of that fact there was absolutely no doubt, and Kemény András felt how hopeless any question of temporising would be. It would only stave off the inevitable ruin by a few months. If the Jew had spoken the truth—and there certainly was every material proof that he had—then, obviously, it would be the grossest injustice to him to advance the money to Bideskúty; thus taking over the mortgage of the house, and for ever depriving Rosenstein of any weapon with which he might enforce at least the part repayment of all the money he declared he had lent in the past, and of all the interest in the future.

"Look here, Rosenstein, supposing all you say is correct . . . now do not interrupt me, I said *supposing*, as there are two of you, each with a different tale . . . you have admitted yourself that three of the loans are unsecured, but that for the pleasure of seeing a poor old man and his family turned out of the home which has belonged to their ancestors for hundreds of years, you are willing to lose the bulk of your principal and interest. . . . Now, will you tell me, what would induce you to forego that pleasure entirely? . . . in

other words, what money would you take for every scrap of paper you hold which bears the signature 'Bideskúty'?"

Rosenstein had been expecting this all the time. In order to have this question put to him, he had lied and sweated now for over an hour, but not a line of his thin countenance expressed triumph or satisfaction, as he said placidly :

"I will own to your Honour that I have often thought that my lord would one day put such a question to me. If the thought occurred to me, just after a whipping from his servants, I invariably dismissed it, for I knew that I should refuse to take a penny less than my due."

"But, suppose, for argument's sake, that it was I who put that question to you? What then?"

Perhaps imperceptibly, certainly unconsciously, a shade—oh! it was the *merest* shade—of softness passed over Rosenstein's hard face, and his voice was not so sharp and hissing, when he replied :

"Your Honour is the only person in the lowlands who speaks to me as to a man, and not to a dog. You have never borrowed money of me, and given me a blow as part interest. Once I fainted in the heat of the sun : you had me taken inside your house and tended me, till I was able to be on my feet again : when every other peasant or lord in the county would have kicked the fainting Jew to one side. . . . If your Honour will make me a fair and just offer for these papers, I will take it. But your Honour must remember that you are throwing away your money on an arrogant lord, who will give contempt in return for kindness, insult for generosity. The lord of Bideskút *can* be nothing to a peasant of Heves. Let your Honour think well before you waste your father's

savings on a spendthrift magnate who looks upon you as the dirt beneath his feet."

Rosenstein had said this very solemnly, and, while he spoke, the ugly look of deceit and cupidity seemed to have left his face. His stooping back was erect, his eyes looked straight before him, there was a certain dignity in his spare form, clad in the long threadbare garment; the centuries of humiliations, of buffetings, seemed forgotten, and contempt as absolute, as withering, as that of the Hungarian nobleman for the despised race, appeared in every line of the thin, satirical mouth, for the spendthrift, arrogant lord who had trampled him under foot.

No doubt the young peasant felt the truth of the Jew's words, the folly of his own hopes, which, at this critical juncture, were, in spite of himself, surging within his heart. Half absently, he collected the four papers, which Rosenstein was handing to him, and the hand which, as if in weariness, he passed over his eyes, trembled visibly.

"I wish to be just with you, Rosenstein, but I have not much money left. If—what seems to me inevitable—Kisfalu and Zárda pass into my possession, after the settling up of these affairs, I must keep some of it, to use if any calamity of flood or fire overtake me. But I will give you 300,000 florins for these pieces of paper, provided my lord gives his consent to the bargain.

Not with a look did Rosenstein betray his triumph. He closed his eyes, no doubt in order to thoroughly enjoy the glorious vision which the young peasant was holding out before him. His deceit, his astuteness, had profited him beyond the dreams of avarice; never for a moment did remorse enter his grasping soul, at the hideous way in which he was deceiving a just and

honourable man. The Jew in Eastern Europe stands at war with the rest of the population ; beaten, buffeted, derided, often injured, his only weapon is his money ; with it, he gets his revenge on peer and peasant, and wields it mercilessly against all, as a poor vengeance for all he has to endure. He bears insults, blows, contempt of every kind, but on the subject of money he is the master, for he has the superior intellect, and the careful thrift, the lack of which brings his oppressors, sooner or later, within his clutches. Rosenstein had himself owned that from Kemény András he had never received anything but kindness, and the hideous advantage he was taking of the young peasant's sense of justice was not aimed at the individual ; it was race against race, and András was paying more than a quarter of a million in expiation of all the Jew had endured at other hands than his.

" You are hard upon a poor man," said Rosenstein at last.

" It is my last word," replied András decisively.

" Will you give me time to think ? "

" Yes, a week from to-day. I must speak with my lord ; he will also want time to think."

Rosenstein noticed how dreamily he spoke, saw the strange, wistful look in the young man's eyes, and, probably, his shrewd mind guessed what was passing in that honest brain, for a curious smile parted his thin lips ; he rubbed his bony hands one against the other, and across his eyes there flashed that look of deadly hatred.

" Shall I wait upon your Honour this day week at the inn, or at Kisfalu ? "

" Neither. I will come myself, and bring the money . . . if my lord consents."

He took up his cap and his riding-whip, and, nodding to the Jew, found himself in the village street again.

All seemed as bright and as gay as ever. Easter Monday had brought young men and maids without. The former, armed with squirts and watering-cans, were deluging the pretty girls as they passed, in true Easter Monday custom ; whilst the latter, courting the watering, proud of their dripping skirts and wet hair, made but mock pretence at running away from their tormentors ; seeing that the girl whose clothes remain dry on this day can have but few adorers.

András watched the merry-makers come and go for a few minutes ; a year ago he would have been the first to snatch a kiss from every pretty girl, after having rendered her helpless under a deluge of water. To-day his heart seemed shut off from all his friends and companions ; it was filled with hopeless longing for a star as far above him as those in heaven, for a fairy vision as bright and as elusive as those *Fata Morgana* draws on the horizon, beyond the plain.

CHAPTER XIX

A SON OF THE PEOPLE

ANDRÁS was nervous and anxious when, having galloped all the way from Árokszállás, he saw the yellow walls of Bideskút close before him. For the first time in his life he was mixed up, through no fault of his own, in a transaction in which lying on one side or the other—or both—formed a prominent part. He hardly knew how to deal with it. If he caught some gipsy or herdsman telling him a lie, he found his riding-whip the most conclusive argument; but what could he do, if the lord of Bideskút deviated from the paths of truth? or if the Jew had embroidered, if not actually invented, the remarkable version of his transactions with the unfortunate nobleman? Kemény András's thoughts were in a whirl. In the presence of either of the two parties he had felt that each was telling him the truth; chiefly because he, himself, did not understand the process of lying, and perhaps thought that the act of telling an untruth bore some imprint on the face of the speaker. My lord's evident anxiety and trouble had distressed him; it seemed to him an impossibility to act the part of sorrow as Bideskúty had done; and yet, again, there were the papers, which Rosenstein swore by all his patriarchs that my lord had signed, well knowing what they contained.

Bideskúty had watched anxiously for the peasant

through his window, and had given orders that Kemény was to be brought to his room immediately. All the morning he had been unable to sit still, and Countess Irma had in vain begged for an explanation of his moodiness. Bideskúty, with truly masculine exclusiveness, would not allow his wife or daughter to participate in his troubles. The woman in Hungary is seldom the friend of her lord ; though he holds her in high esteem : high enough to share all joys and honours equally with him, but not high enough to allow her to join in his sorrows.

There was a perceptible hesitation in András's manner when my lord, eager and excited, stretched out a hand towards him. The young peasant, full of the belief that the nobleman was playing him false, paused an instant before he placed his honest hand in my lord's trembling one. But Bideskúty looked so careworn, so haggard and anxious, that the kind-hearted young peasant felt again that overwhelming sympathy for the foolish and sorely stricken man ; more especially as in his softened mood there was a look in my lord's eyes, which were blue, that melted all András's anger as the snow upon the plains at the first kiss of the April sun.

"Do you bring good news, friend?" asked Bideskúty.

He could not sit ; he was pacing up and down the room restlessly, his anxious eyes every now and then searching his creditor's face.

"The news I bring, my lord may call good or bad, I cannot tell," replied András quietly.

"Speak, man, cannot you see that I am in a fever? Speak ! am I a beggar? . . . "

"Not so fast, my lord," said András ; "first let me

assure you that things are not desperate, that they depend on yourself to be put entirely right. There is no cause for sorrow . . . as yet."

"Rosenstein? . . ."

"Unfortunately, my lord," said András with some nervousness, but trying to speak very kindly, "the Jew has a very different tale to tell, from the one your lordship has told me."

Like a furious bull Bideskúty faced his creditor.

"Man, do you dare to say . . ."

"I only dare humbly," interrupted András with absolute calm, "to try and see justice done, and to help your lordship in your great difficulty. I am neither noble nor learned; my education is what a kind and clever priest has given me, in the intervals of cultivating the soil, and I am not clever enough to read in the minds of other men. Your lordship has told me one thing: Rosenstein tells a different tale . . . unfortunately the Jew holds proofs of his assertion, and you have but your word."

"And do you dare stand there before me, man, and say that the word of a Hungarian nobleman is not better than a thousand proofs?"

"I know very little about noblemen, my lord, and I am afraid in the law courts of Gyöngyös the papers you signed will weigh heavily against the words you speak."

"I told you I never read those confounded papers," persisted Bideskúty obstinately.

"It is useless going over the same ground, your lordship; and I think it would be best, in your own interests, that you should hear Rosenstein's story, so that you may decide whether you will accept what I propose."

"Why should I listen to his tissue of falsehoods? Why does he not come here and repeat them, so that I may flog his lying soul out of his cursed body?"

"Because your lordship has unfortunately, and most recklessly, placed yourself and your good name unre-servedly in his hands."

"My good name?"

"In a court of law, my lord, we all stand alike. Pater Ambrosius will tell you that before the throne of the Divine Judge, lord and peasant, Jew and Christian, will have equal justice, and that the lawmakers and judges in our beautiful country try to be as just as God Himself has taught them to be. Now will your lordship listen? . . . I have here in my pocket three separate papers, mentioning three separate loans I made to you on the security of Kisfalu, of Zárda, and of Bideskút (the latter without the house and grounds and stables); these loans your lordship acknowledged and agreed to pay a certain interest upon them. . . I must ask your lordship not to interrupt me; this is a very serious affair, not of feelings, but of facts. Your lordship, in your present circumstances, is absolutely unable to pay the interest, which is already in arrears, for at least a year to come; as for the principal, it is entirely out of your lordship's power now ever to repay that, as you will never have the chance of putting a single florin by, while you are obliged to satisfy Rosenstein's demands. . . Does your lordship understand me?"

Moodily, Bideskúty nodded his head.

"As far, therefore, as law and justice are concerned," resumed András emphatically, "Kisfalu, Zárda, and the lands of Bideskút become my property absolutely. I have paid 850,000 florins for them,

which is more money than any other estate of the same size would fetch in the lowlands."

András paused a moment, for there was a look of such hopeless sorrow on the ruined nobleman's face that it went straight to the honest young peasant's heart to have to still further plunge the knife into the unfortunate man's wound.

"I would have been only too willing to wait and temporise till your lordship's circumstances looked a little more cheerful," he resumed with infinite gentleness, "but as matters now stand I should be doing you no good, and hopelessly endangering my fortune, which, after all, I cannot very well afford to do. Rosenstein declares, and I am bound to admit that he has full proof of what he says, that after your lordship had concluded the loans with me, you borrowed at intervals another 950,000 florins from him, for the greater part of which he had no security, and therefore charged the usurious interest you know of."

"I never had the money. I am ready to swear that, since my word is not good enough," protested Bideskúty hopelessly; "the man is an outrageous liar!"

"Unfortunately, your lordship signed receipts for the money."

"I tell you I never read what I signed."

"Rosenstein swears that you did. And he holds the receipts for the money. Does your Honour deny in any way that you signed the papers?"

"No! I must have signed altogether seven papers; I do not deny that; two when I gave Kisfalu as security; two when I pledged my lands of Bideskút; two with Zárda, and one some eight months ago, when I mortgaged this house, grounds, and stables for 100,000 florins."

"And I only hold three of those papers, my lord ; and I know nothing of this last loan."

It seemed indeed hopeless ; Bideskúty was beginning to dimly realise how utterly blind and foolish he had been. An implacable Nemesis had overtaken him in the midst of all his arrogance and reckless extravagance, and he had fallen a helpless prey in the hands of the first unscrupulous man who had laid a trap for him. For some time there was silence, while the wretched man stared moodily before him, making vain endeavours to realise the utter ruin which stared him in the face. András, full of deep sympathy, ready with the help he had come to bring, was seeking for words in which to frame his offer.

"It seems to me," said Bideskúty at last, "that the news you brought could not very well have been worse."

'Pardon me, my lord, I have told you the worst ; the evil as it stands ; it is high time I placed before you the remedy, such as I humbly propose it.'

"A remedy ? There is one, then ?"

Hungarian nature is eminently buoyant and sanguine. In a moment Bideskúty raised his head, and a flash of hope illumined his careworn features.

"Why in the world did you sit there, then, and croak like some raven of evil, man ? If you have good news, why did you make sport of me, by watching my misery ?"

"To every evil there is a remedy, my lord, only we are not always ready to take it."

"Are you going to speak, instead of preaching, man ?" said Bideskúty, boiling over with impatience.

"Rosenstein, my lord, knowing that his money is in peril, and holding but one real security, namely, that

on this house and grounds, has offered to take one third of the capital lent, in exchange for every scrap of paper your Honour has ever signed."

"One third? . . . Why, you said just now that I have signed receipts amounting to 950,000 florins . . . one third of that would be . . . ?"

"300,000 florins, in ready money, my lord," said András.

"Man! I have said before: you are made of money; 300,000 florins may mean nothing to you. I can no more find that sum than I can jump out of this window without breaking my neck. I have not a single foot of land that I can call my own, not a stack of corn which I can sell. The remedy may sound a good one to you, it is the last death-blow to all my hopes."

"I know perfectly well that your lordship has no money; and I was not proposing that you should pay that 300,000 florins, but. . . ."

"But?"

"But that I should," said András very quietly.

To all appearances he had never departed from his attitude of absolute calm; and Bideskúty—quite unable to understand the peasant's self-contained nature—looked with astonishment at this man who spoke of vast sums of money as if they were no more to him than a handful of maize.

"I do not understand," said Bideskúty at last, "or else you do not altogether realise my position. What use would there be in my owing you 300,000 florins, any more than 950,000 to Rosenstein? I could no more repay the one than I can the other; and the lowest possible amount of interest would, with the present state of the floods, be absolutely beyond my power to pay."

"I was not proposing to lend your lordship the money," said András in a voice so low that Bideskúty could hardly hear it, "but . . . to give it."

Evidently his self-control was being put to a severe test. His lips trembled as he spoke, and his voice, hardly above a whisper, had a curious gasping tone. His breathing came hard and fast, as if the powerful chest was bursting from within, and his hands were tightly locked together, whilst on his forehead great veins stood up like cords. Still, Bideskúty, unconscious, did not understand.

"Give it to me, man?" he said with sorrowful dignity, "you are dreaming! I have seen much trouble lately, it is true; but I have not yet, thank God, stooped so low as to take alms from a stranger."

"No! not from a stranger, my lord . . ." added András with an effort, "but . . . from one near . . . very near to you . . ."

"I do not understand! . . . What do you mean? . . . I can accept money from no one . . . you cannot think such a thing possible! . . . What do you mean?" he repeated again.

"My lord," said András at last, shaking off his nervousness, with a violent effort, and rising to his full height so that he stood before Bideskúty in all the inborn pride of a Hungarian lowland peasant, "in my garden at Kisfalu there is a beautiful rose-tree which stands alone in fragrant loveliness. My mother never planted anything close to it, for both she and I felt that no other flower was worthy to bloom near that rose, so surpassingly beautiful is it. Alone it stood for many years, growing every summer more radiant, and filling the air around with its sweet overpowering odour; a very queen among her humbler fragrant

sisters, which, in her isolation, she seemed to disdain. . . . This year, my lord, at the foot of that lovely rose-tree there has sprung—who knows how?—a humble bed of moss. Was it the birds who wantonly carried the vulgar seed to the court of the queen of flowers? or did that Divine hand which cares for every blade of grass direct that that humble moss should be at the feet of the gorgeous rose? . . . Who knows? . . . but since a year, the tiny green leaves have dared to look very closely at the magnificence of the garden queen, whilst other fragrant and beautiful flowers have been kept respectfully away.”

For one moment the young peasant paused. His voice had become quite firm; though still low and infinitely tender, it was clear and without a tremor. The flowery mode of speech—the inalienable characteristic of the Hungarian language, when applied to deep emotion—sounded peculiarly sweet in the mouth of this handsome young son of the soil, and, instinctively, Bideskúty listened, vaguely feeling that beneath that proud, calm bearing lay hidden a torrent of feeling so overwhelming that it commanded respect.

“At first, your Honour,” resumed András, “my mother would have punished that moss for its presumption, and, tearing it up by its root, have flung it out, with other noisome weeds, on to the plain where it might wither, since it had dared approach so near the queen. But the tiny, soft bed looked so green and cool, and the sun above so scorching and hot, that the moss was allowed to stay for a while to protect the feet of the queen from the more parching rays. Since then, my lord, there it has remained, humble and protecting, cool and green in the heat of the summer, warm and clinging in the winter, sheltering the roots of

heart, a wistful longing which made him as a child, with heavy tears blurring his vision, and great aching sobs shaking his frame.

Suddenly he started ; a hand—heavy, but not unkind—was placed upon his shoulder. He turned and saw an old man, bent with grief, with a look of humbled pride in his sorrowing eyes, which went straight to the honest young peasant's heart.

"Friend, when I first realised," said Bideskúty, "what your meaning was, an uncontrollable fit of anger seized me. You must forgive me . . . I am an old man . . . and have not yet fully learned the lessons of this century. The idea that I should give my daughter to a peasant seemed to me so preposterous that for the moment I forgot . . . that you hold my life practically in your hands . . . for if I and my family are turned out of our home, I shall never survive the sorrow, and God only knows what would happen then to my wife and to my Ilonka."

András would have spoken, but Bideskúty resumed immediately.

"I know what you would say : that you have no desire to force me. Hey ! friend, that is as it may be ! We are all born free agents in this world, and yet who can resist his destiny, struggle how he may ? The land which once was mine has passed out of my hands into yours with a few careless dashes of the pen on some accursed bits of paper. The next few days will, unless a miracle should happen—and there are not many miracles nowadays,—see me and my family go forth like a herd of wandering gipsies, homeless and friendless ; and those who have fawned most on my hospital—will be the first to throw stones at me for my folly. In the midst of this hopeless ruin you come to me,

and offer not only to save me and mine, but by this same offer guarantee that my lands will, in spite of all, belong to my child, and ultimately to my grandchildren. What can I do? When a man has a knife at his throat, it is a small matter to ask him if he will part with his wealth."

"My lord . . ."

"Nay! do not speak! You have had your say. What you now would add could not alter things. You urged your strongest plea when you spoke of my grandchildren; and in holding my lands, you know well that you hold the key to my consent. What can you say more? that you love my daughter? Why, man! of course you love her; she is very beautiful and infinitely above you. We all love God and the Virgin Mary. That you will be a slave to her? I have no doubt of that; you come from a race of serfs. That you will make her happy? There man, I think you will try in vain; my daughter Ilonka could not be happy in the hut of a peasant. If I and her mother give our consent to this strange union . . . mind you, I only said 'if' . . . we shall be sacrificing our child for the sake of our grandchildren, and their children after them; for the sake of the land of Bideskút, which will then never pass out of the family at all, though it will have been tainted by passing through peasant hands."

"My lord," said András, wearily, "when I came here to speak with you of these things, I tried to think of you only as the father of the being who to me is almost divine. Would it not be best both for your own dignity and for mine, that you did not force or sting me into forgetting this?"

"Forgive me, friend, I am hasty! Events have

crowded in upon me . . . and have deprived me of my power of thinking. . . . I have had much trouble . . . you are young . . . you do not understand the griefs of older men. . . . Perhaps also your pride has never suffered a humiliation . . . like the one I suffer now. . . . Will you leave me to myself? . . . I must think . . . I must be alone . . . and I must speak with the noble Countess."

Silently András had taken his cap, and silently, automatically, he left the room. As in a dream he walked across the hall, and down the noble staircase. Bideskúty had not bidden him good-bye. He had said nothing definite. He had hurled a problematical "if" at András in the midst of insults calmly spoken, and the young peasant's pride had writhed beneath the cold, callous, cruel words.

Oh ! that love should make such abject fools of us, that for one sweet sake we should be willing to endure tortures such as the very demons of hell cannot devise for the punishment of souls at war with their Creator ! How strange it is that at the feet of one being on earth we should be willing to sacrifice our manhood and our self-respect, and yet that this very sacrifice, that same degradation, should ennoble us beyond all glorious deeds, and render us equal to the angels.

How András spent the remainder of that day he could not say. The roads were muddy, and Csillag could do no more than carefully pick her way in the mire. Yet she understood her master's sorrow, for she roamed with him upon the *puszta* till long after the shades of evening had wrapped the lowlands in gloom. Far ahead, the roar of the Tarna lent an additional note of sorrow and desolation to the land. It was late when at last Kemény András reached the quiet

farmhouse where Etelka, at her spinning, was waiting anxiously for her son. She went to the door when she heard Csillag's hoofs outside, and through the darkness watched András as he gently groomed his favourite animal and made her comfortable for the night. He had not seen his mother evidently, for otherwise his first greeting would have been for her. Etelka's heart felt inexpressibly sad when she saw how slow and heavy was his tread, as he walked towards the house. In the garden he stopped close to where stood a lovely rose-tree covered with tiny buds, the promise of a glorious June; and Etelka wondered why her son touched each unopened blossom with his hand, and then stooped as if to kiss them.

CHAPTER XX

THE ANSWER

FOUR days later the answer came. For four weary days had the suspense lasted, during which time András's iron constitution almost gave way under the strain of wearing uncertainty. No one heard his voice during that time. Silently he toiled like a very slave upon the beloved land which now, at last, was his. With almost savage fury he tried to tire out his strong body by day, for the sake of earning a few hours' heavy, dreamless sleep by night. Of his hopes, his fears, his love, he would not, dared not allow himself to think ; and when the early evening shadows had closed in upon the land, he would mount on Csillag's back and roam restlessly with her upon the plain. There in solitude, silence, and peace, his weary mind found rest, his aching nerves solace and comfort. The distant roar of the flood lulled him to forgetfulness, and, musingly, he would watch for hours the wandering storks overhead, or the swallows in their flight. He had told everything to Etelka. It would have been useless to try and deceive her ; her fond, anxious, motherly eyes read deeply within the loved son's soul ; long ago she had guessed his secret, had seen wild joy alternate with mad grief, and hope arise but to give birth to despair. And, silently, she had wept and prayed : prayed to God and to the Virgin Mary to avert the

catastrophe which threatened her András's happiness. Her shrewd mind, rendered doubly acute by earnest love for her boy, showed her the hideous image of misery that so preposterous, so unequal a marriage would inevitably bring beneath the humble peasant's home. The proud lady, nurtured from her cradle to look on every peasant with contempt, linked against her will to save her parents' ruin, with one of the despised race ! Oh ! the pity of it ! the shame ! the remorse ! Etelka foresaw, with unerring judgment, the contempt with which the dainty girl would place her soft white hand into András's rough brown palm, the blush of horror and anger with which she would respond to his strange masterful passion, the passion of an unlettered, half-educated son of the soil, born and bred in the free life of the plain, with warm, breathing, living nature to teach him the lessons of life, and the years of petty tyranny behind him, during which every feeling, every emotion was held in constant check ; ready, now that, rich and free, he had reached powerful manhood, to break through every bond, and cry out for response from one being who should return ardour for ardour, passion for passion, kiss for kiss.

Etelka wept and prayed as she thought of that son eating his heart out for longing to obtain a smile from those aristocratic lips, and wearing out his manhood to smooth away the curl of contempt from the corners of the dainty mouth.

Oh ! for one great crushing blow ! the refusal of that careless, yet surely loving father, to sacrifice his child to his own folly, and of that proud mother to allow her daughter to stoop so low, for the sake of the gold and the land ! A blow which would be terrible when it fell : and Etelka's heart ached, in the very midst of her

prayers, when she thought of the sorrow, the despair of her boy, seeing all his fairy visions suddenly and irretrievably dispelled ; but, though the blow would be cruel, it would be sharp and sudden, and Etelka trusted that the all-absorbing care for that beloved land would soon teach him to forget the other love, the Fata Morgana-like vision born but to fade away.

How infinitely better than the daily, hourly torture of an ill-assorted union, the wrecked life, the hourly shame, the mad joy of a few hours, the grief of lifelong days! And now the answer had come : a message from the noble lord of Bideskút to Kemény András, bidding him come to the castle to present his respects to the noble Countess and to her young ladyship : the peasant was bidden to pay his court to the noble lady, the stars were descending from heaven in order to walk upon the plains.

András was from home when the message came, brought by Jankó, who had ridden over from Bideskút burning with curiosity as to what my lord's extraordinary condescension might mean. He would have stayed to ask a hundred questions, for all tongues were wagging within the kitchen of Bideskút, but Etelka seemed so sad and looked so silent that Jankó dared not speak ; he felt as if, unconsciously, he had been the harbinger of evil tidings, and rode away wondering why Etelka's eyes were full of tears when she heard of the unwonted honour done to her son.

Etelka was glad that András was away. He had ridden over to Zárda at break of day, and the mother wished to have her son secure in her arms when she first told him the great news—the realisation of his maddest hopes.

She watched at the door till Jankó was out of sight,

then gazed out across the *puszta* in the direction of Zárda ; and when she saw a tiny speck upon the horizon, which gradually grew and took the form of a horse and rider, idly picking their way through the muddy roads, with a heavy sigh she went within.

She waited till her son, tired out from his ride, had knelt down beside her spinning-wheel, and, placing his arms round her, had rested his hot, aching head on her shoulder, then she said :

“András! for good or for evil, your wishes are fulfilled. My lord desires your presence at the castle, that you may pay your respects to the lady who is to be your wife!”

There was a dead silence, for András neither spoke nor stirred. His arms were still round Etelka's shoulders, and his head upon her breast. She felt his grip tighten and his whole frame tremble against hers ; she could not see his face, and could scarcely hear him breathe ; but suddenly a great sob, like the breaking of an overburdened heart, seemed to shake him from head to foot, and, with a wild cry, that at last betrayed all the pent-up passions, the love, the hopes and fears so resolutely held in check, he buried his head in that dear mother's lap, and sobbed with this joy so great, so wild, that it was almost pain.

Gently Etelka soothed him, smoothed his matted hair, spoke quaint endearing words, such as she used to whisper when as a tiny lad he had sought comfort in her arms against his father's rough words and knotty stick. Gradually the paroxysm passed away ; but for quite a long while he remained at her knee, holding the dear one in his arms, his head pillowed against her breast ; and she, poor soul ! her eyes swimming over with tears, prayed to God not to forsake her beloved son in this, his greatest joy.

CHAPTER XXI

THE NOBLE LADY

It was an anxious morning. Most of the night, neither Bideskúty nor the Countess Irma had slept; each lay awake thinking of what the coming, eventful day would bring.

"I wish we had told her all," sighed Bideskúty mentally, as he despatched Jankó off on the momentous message, which was to bring the strange suitor to the noble house.

"It is better so!" was the self-satisfied conclusion arrived at by the Countess Irma, as she turned over her daughter's ribbons and sashes to decide which would be most suitable to wear on the important occasion.

And now it was close upon mid-day, and the lord of Bideskút was nervously pacing up and down his smoking-room, unable to sit still, or even to smoke his favourite pipe, awaiting anxiously, and dreading the first interview: speculating on the probable attitude of his daughter, the possible scene.

He had had a very hard task in explaining to his wife the cruel necessity which would force their only child, the last descendant of those chieftains who had helped to place King Mátyás on the throne, into the arms of a peasant—the grandson of a serf. Countess Irma was a woman of the world. The horror of so

preposterous a *mésalliance* struck her at first with terrible force ; but, when she found herself placed between the two alternatives, of facing complete penury in a provincial town, with one maid to cook the daily meal, and a tax-collector thundering weekly at the door, and that of seeing her daughter the wife of a man infinitely beneath her in the social scale, but whose wealth was large enough to restore to Bideskút all its former splendour, she chose what she considered the lesser evil.

The idea that any selfishness was mixed up in this choice would have seemed to Countess Irma utterly preposterous. Marriage, in her eyes, was as much a business contract as the buying and selling of land or wheat, and of far too serious a moment to be swayed by any question of sentiment. That the young peasant's one desire (now that he had had the temerity to become passing rich) was to own a noble wife, was too obvious a fact to be much wondered at, and the idea that Ilonka might have hidden ideals, unbeknown to her mother, was in itself an impossibility.

Countess Irma had never heard of marriage in connection with any sentiment. Ruin had, with truly plebeian want of discrimination, knocked and been admitted within the aristocratic walls of Bideskút. A certain marriage—preposterous, monstrous, true, yet perfectly feasible—presented itself as a means of averting a catastrophe which was a hundred-fold more hideous, and more monstrous ; Countess Irma thought—as her husband had done—of future generations, of duty to posterity, of a great name which for five hundred years had added lustre to the history of a warlike country, now threatened with extinction and ruin ; her duty appeared clear to her,—she felt she was making a sacrifice, nerved herself to the task, and unflinchingly

fulfilled it. Her daughter was asked of her. She gave her daughter, trusting that she could keep her well under her wing for at least eleven months out of the twelve, during which Ilonka might fancy herself a grass-widow, living with her parents. That the peasant husband would ever dare to assert his rights, to keep his wife under his lowly roof, never entered Countess Irma's head. She was convinced that her decision was for her daughter's and her husband's happiness, fully convinced that she was acting unselfishly in the matter, doing what was right. Bideskúty, humiliated, heart-broken, harassed by his wife's reproaches, had left the child's future in her mother's hands.

"Let her have a free choice," he had begged half remorsefully.

But Countess Irma called his hesitation "sentimental folly."

"Leave her to me," she said, "and for God's sake do not interfere. You have proved yourself utterly incapable of conducting your own affairs. This one at least I mean to carry through."

What passed between mother and daughter Bideskúty never knew. The interview lasted over two hours, late one night, and when at last Countess Irma came to bed, she said:

"You can send for the peasant to-morrow. The sooner the marriage ceremony is gone through, the better."

Bideskúty longed to ask many questions. In his heart he had a deep love for and pride in the lovely child.

"Remember, Gyuri, I have not told Ilonka why this marriage is necessary. Thank God I have

brought her up to obey her parents without question and without argument."

"I will not have her unhappy . . . " protested Bideskúty.

"My dear Gyuri, what nonsense you talk. Of course she is not unhappy. Why should she be? She knows nothing of the man; she cannot dislike him, therefore how can she be unhappy."

This was unanswerable logic, apparently. Bideskúty sighed, but he trusted to his wife's judgment. He fully believed that women understood one another, and he had never been allowed a say in the bringing up of his daughter.

And Kemény András had been sent for. He was expected every moment. Bideskúty was hideously nervous; anxiously he scanned his wife's face; she sat rigid and erect in the middle of the room, working at some knitting with irritating persistency. Close by the window, her hands lying idly in her lap, her face turned away from her parents, sat Ilonka. Bideskúty, who had expected and dreaded a pathetic feminine scene, with tears and prayers, felt quite relieved to see his daughter quiet and serene.

He certainly thought her strangely altered since last night. She seemed somehow to have grown more stately, and decidedly older. Her eyes were tearless, but they had a curious look in them, as if they were looking far, very far away, and all the pink colour had left her cheeks. But the Countess Irma had said that the child was not unhappy. She certainly had made no protest, and seemed quite calmly to be awaiting her future husband. No doubt natural, girlish coyness, excitement, curiosity, had made her cheeks pale, and given that far-off strange look to her eyes.

The sound of horses' hoofs up the acacia drive. . . . Bideskúty wiped the beads of perspiration from his forehead: his nervousness was quite painful; even Countess Irma's hands trembled as she held her knitting; soon the sound of voices, the opening and shutting of doors, a heavy, firm tread on the flagstones of the hall and passages, preceded by Jankó's lighter step. . . . Ilonka, alone, where she sat, had not stirred; her hands, which lay idly in her lap, had not trembled, only her eyes were now fixed, large and glowing, on the door before her. . . .

Then Jankó threw it open, and, immediately behind him, the tall picturesque figure of the peasant suitor, in all the barbaric splendour of his national attire, stood out against the massive dark oak frame of the door. His great height, his broad, powerful shoulders, the dignity of his presence, seemed still further enhanced by the great mantle of sheepskin, gorgeously embroidered in many coloured designs by Etelka's loving hands, which hung from his shoulders to his feet, by his broad belt covered with massive silver bosses, and by the full white lawn sleeves and trousers, a very masterpiece of exquisite fineness and delicate embroidery. His face was very pale, and his eyes—dark, burning, magnetic—had travelled swiftly round the room, till they had caught sight of the frail figure by the window. . . . He seemed almost as in a trance; half dazed he walked into the room, and stooped to kiss the hand which the noble Countess had deigned to extend towards him.

My lord had said "Isten hozta!" (God has brought you) and now was talking in disjointed sentences of lands and floods, of rain and sunshine. András scarcely heard; he tried to answer intelligibly, forced

himself not to look towards the window, where the Countess stood talking to his fairy vision who seemed so strangely white and fragile.

Then suddenly the Countess beckoned to him ; he hardly had the strength to walk ; he passed his hand across his eyes, for his vision was getting dim.

The graceful white form had risen. A pair of blue eyes, large, burning, terrified, were fixed upon him as he advanced.

"Ilonka, my child, this is Kemény András of Kisfalú, who has your father's and my consent to express his love for you, and ask you to become his wife."

The voice sounded as if it were far away. A roar like that of the flooded Tarna filled his ears ; all his senses seemed concentrated in one of gazing at his dream.

"Give him your hand, Ilonka."

Mechanically, obediently, a tiny white hand was stretched towards him, and András stooped very low and tremblingly took it in his own. A look of infinite yearning and tenderness was in his eyes, a look of appeal infinitely touching and pathetic in the powerful, rugged face ; that look but begged for a look, a responsive gaze from those blue eyes which stared so strangely, so vacantly, as if he, in his humility, his love, his adoration, were far away from her.

Tenderly he raised the tiny cold hand to his lips, and sought to warm it into response by one long passionate kiss. . . . A slight tremor seemed to shake her, and she tried to snatch her hand away from his. He longed to speak to her, but great sobs choked his throat ; nervously he held the tiny hand imprisoned in his own, and with longing gaze tried to look into those blue eyes which stared so vacantly, so strangely afar.

Joy, ah, well, it was a great joy, a joy so infinite, so complete, that his heart well-nigh broke under it, and the pain of it seemed more than he could bear.

My lord came up to speak to him ; the Countess also said a few words : both meant to be kind, no doubt, but their voices jarred upon András's nerves, forcibly breaking the enchanting spell, and dragging him back to earth. The tiny hand had escaped ; he was forced to turn towards Bideskúty, who led him to the farther end of the room to talk of business matters. How long he stayed, or what he said, András did not know. The talk of business, the formalities, the discussion of the marriage plans sickened and enervated him. He longed to take that fragile being in his arms, and on Csillag's back ride away with her across the *puszta*.

She had not spoken once. The whole thing seemed strangely unreal to András ; the voices of my lord, and of the lady his wife, sounded in a weird confusion in his ears ; even his vision had grown troubled, so long and so earnestly had he gazed in the one direction. The Countess said something about the month of May, and the best time for the wedding ; András replied to that, no doubt, for my lady rose soon after and said some very condescending words. But after that it was all darkness, dreary and blank, for the seat in the window was empty.

The lord of Bideskút had become silent. András thought he might take his leave. He longed to be alone, to ride across the plain, to feel Csillag's hoofs thundering beneath him, to leave the castle behind, where the air seemed to have grown stifling, and where strange spectres of evil foreboding seemed to dance a hideous dance of death before him.

Bideskúty accompanied him to the door. With his

own hands he handed up to András the stirrup-cup of rich Hungarian wine. Jankó stood wondering at the gate, and nearly fell over backwards when he heard my lord say : " God be with you, my son ! " adding immediately : " Your place will be laid for you at the mid-day meal on Sunday."

CHAPTER XXII

A DREAM

THE rest of the day András spent upon the plain ; not even to his mother could he have spoken of this interview, of that fragile vision, of the tiny hand on which, in his temerity, he had dared to imprint a kiss. He left Csillag to roam about at will, and, spreading his mantle upon the ground, he allowed his mind to dwell at leisure on the wonderful thing that had happened.

The feeling of unreality still clung to it ; and dreamily he gazed at his rough brown hands which had held another imprisoned—so tiny, and oh ! so cold ! Now that he was away from her, András cursed himself for his clumsiness, his silence. There were so many things he might have said to her ! if only those great blue eyes had been once turned to his, if only she had not been so strange, so distant ! . . . and was not that slight tremble a shudder which went through her young body, when his kiss, glowing and scorching with his wild passion, had dared to touch her tiny ice-cold hand ?

He might have said to her : “ I love you, Ilonka ! my Ilonka ! mine ! mine ! mine ! ” but then, how infinitely great was that love, and how desecrated it would seem if words tried to express it !

His ! His ! She really one day would be his ! . . . One day soon . . . the Countess had spoken of one

day in May. . . . When the sun was hot, and the roses would begin to bloom . . . one day . . . she would come home with him . . . her white figure, tall and lithe, would fill the lowly farmhouse with a radiance which would be almost divine. . . . She would stand with the last rays of the setting sun, which always crept in through the tiny windows, playing upon her golden curls. . . . There would be silence in the house, for Etelka will have gone to her own room to pray or to spin, leaving her son and his bride alone. . . . His bride! . . . With the sun upon her golden curls . . . and András would watch every hair of that dainty head, and, with the exquisite self-inflicted torture of suspense, touch with reverent finger every curl, ere he dared clasp the queenly form wholly in his arms, drinking with insatiable eyes that loveliness fashioned by God for him, the lowly peasant, prouder than any king.

Oh! the joy of this dream! the agony of the fairy vision, the pain that was a happiness to bear, the joy that was inexpressible torture! Alone upon the vast plain, away from human eyes, András dared to conjure up this vision, and found mad delight in torturing himself with those Fata Morgana-like dreams of great blue eyes, large and wondering, growing soft and misty, moist and tender with responsive passion, of that exquisite tiny mouth, perfumed and chaste as the petals of a rosebud, of the soft red lips, parting with a smile, preparing for a kiss, of the warmth of her breath, the tears in her eyes, the quickly drawn breath through her delicate nostrils. . . . And she in his arms! his bride! his wife! András closed his eyes—the vision faded away, and in its place he saw another, the reality of a few hours ago: tall and stately, and oh! so

cold ! with a far-off look in those blue eyes, large and tearless ; and a curious tremble—was it a shudder ?—which left the tiny hand colder, icier, still.

But, no ! no ! this vision should not stay ! that coldness, his ardour would melt ! that absent look, his glowing eyes would imprison ! that shudder, his love would soothe. He would strew roses at her feet ; wealth, joys, pleasures, all that could bring a smile on those lips, a tender look in those eyes ; and if all he had and could do or give her was not enough, he would lay his life in her tiny hands and let her crush it if she would.

Long after the darkness had covered the plain with gloom, András still lay upon the earth, wrapped in his mantle, his eyes following the swiftly travelling clouds, dwelling dreamily on each twinkling star.

Etelka knew that she would not see him that night. And yet she could not go to rest. Her hands lying idly in her lap, she sat beside the window looking out anxiously towards the plain. Only when the first streak of gold broke the darkness of the sky did she hear the well-known sound of Csillag's hoofs. Then she put out all the lights, content that her son was safe, knowing full well that he would wish to be alone. She listened for his tread, which was light and free ; she watched him in the yard as he tethered Csillag, and she saw that he walked erect. Then, as he crossed the garden, he again paused beside his favourite rose-tree : one small bud showed a tiny streak of pink between its green sepals. Etelka remembered how, earlier in the day, she had noticed this first sign of the opening bloom,—now, with a quick, triumphant gesture, András plucked the opening blossom and carried it with him to his home.

CHAPTER XXIII

HOW THE NEWS WAS RECEIVED

THANK God, news travels very slowly on the lowlands, at all times, but more especially when the early spring rains have rendered the roads well-nigh impassable. Countess Irma had reckoned upon this, when she decided that the unfortunate marriage should be accomplished before the news of it could reach the ears of her relatives and friends only as a *fait accompli*, mixed with a sauce of reasons, both romantic and plausible, which had induced the proud Countess to give her only daughter to a peasant.

Ilonka had been tiresome: more tiresome than the Countess Irma could ever have supposed a daughter of hers to be. Not that there had been any question of resistance, or actual disobedience. Thank God! girls in Hungarian aristocratic houses had not yet caught the hideous English ideas of independence. "Honour thy father and thy mother" was still more than a dead letter to them; but the child had argued and had begged; had talked of foolish sentiment, of love for that penniless young Madách, whom the Countess sincerely wished at the bottom of the Tarna.

There had been one or two very upsetting scenes, and Countess Irma's ears were very frequently shocked at her daughter's strange ideas of matrimony and love. Love, before marriage? Truly preposterous. *She*

had never been in love with Gyuri till after the wedding Mass, when it became her duty to love him ! and was there ever a more model couple in all the lowlands of Hungary ? Never had any one heard the slightest dispute or faintest disagreement between the Countess and her lord. The idea of love in a young girl's mind was positively indecent ! Fortunately the Countess was more than convinced that young Madách was about to marry the daughter of Schmidt the jeweller, whose dowry was said to exceed three millions in solid gold.

There was no crime in fashioning that conviction into a positive fact, since it had the desired effect of driving those indecent thoughts out of Ilonka's head, and brought about that peace of mind and submission to her parents' will which is the only real happiness for a well-born girl. Certainly, after she had been told of this fact, the child became quite submissive ; she never even expressed horror at the idea of having a peasant for her future lord. Her attitude towards him was from the first beyond reproach. Countess Irma was proud of her daughter's frigid bearing towards the low-born odious creature who had dared to ask for her daughter's hand in exchange for his gold.

At heart the Countess rejoiced at the humiliation the peasant would have to endure in the future at his wife's hands, and the withering contempt with which Ilonka would one day overwhelm him would more than counterbalance the bitter humiliation her mother was now suffering, through forcing her aristocratic lips to say "fiam" (my son) to a man who wore a sheep-skin mantle, and had hands as rough and brown as those of the herdsmen. The Countess's mind dwelt lovingly on all the snubs, the disdain, he would have to

endure anon, when the marriage was actually accomplished; and these thoughts helped her to get over the immediate present, when twice a week she had to receive the odious man with some show of civility.

The arrogance with which he bore himself was simply unendurable. Countess Irma tried by every means in her power to wound or to snub him; but her weapons, more often than not, seemed to turn against herself. He had a way of looking through and beyond her, with a look which placed him beyond the reach of her most poisonous darts. At first she had talked a great deal of the honour which was being done to a man in so lowly a station; but once he had quietly remarked :

"No one, noble lady, understands better than I do the honour of touching even the tips of Ilonka's fingers. But that honour is so great that it cannot be enhanced by any reference to it by other lips than mine."

After that the Countess gave up the topic. She maintained a coldly haughty attitude, on the perpetual defensive lest the peasant should presume on his position by undue familiarity. She never allowed Ilonka to see her *fiancé* out of her sight, nor to exchange any but the merest commonplace words, well within her hearing. She had noticed with annoyance that Ilonka had taken to blushing when she heard Csillag's hoofs on the acacia drive, and this annoyed her immensely. She wished her daughter to adhere to her attitude of disdainful impassiveness. The low-bred peasant had got what he wanted. So had the Countess; for the mortgage on the house had been paid up to Rosenstein; and all Gyuri's foolish, careless, and compromising papers been handed back through Kemény

András's hands and destroyed. It was terrible to think that all the lands which had been in the Bideskúty family for seven hundred years now belonged to the descendant of those peasants who had been the veriest slaves to their lords. Thank God! it was but a temporary alienation into those ugly, rough brown hands. Very soon Ilonka would have a son, who should be brought up away from his vulgar kindred, fashioned by his loving grandmother into a true aristocrat, with every taint of common blood eradicated from his nature. And then, surely, after a while, Providence, all-just and merciful, would remove the rich and vulgar father from the noble son's path altogether; the boy would drop the very name of Kemény that spoke of peasantry and of low birth, and a petition, which his Majesty Francis Joseph would not refuse, would stipulate that the noble name of Bideskút be borne once more by the owner of the lands.

Oh, yes! there were trying days to get over, but all would be well in time. Ilonka would no doubt go through some terrible struggles before she finally succeeded in putting the presumptuous brute into his proper place; therefore the Countess hurried on all the preparations for the wedding, sorted out the linen, which from Ilonka's very birth had been collected in anticipation of her marriage. Kemény András evidently meant to leave upon the Countess's shoulders the entire onus of announcing the news to the servants, and thence to the village. It was strange but true that, so far, not one of the peasantry seemed to know of the gigantic honour about to be done to one of their kind; it almost looked as if András did not care to speak about it, to brag of it, as people of his class surely would always do; only Pater Ambrosius had

evidently been told, for, one Sunday, just before dinner, he had taken Ilonka's hand in his and, patting it very gently, he had said :

"Let us all thank God, noble lady, for the great happiness He has vouchsafed to grant you ; and pray to Him that you may worthily love the truly good man who is to become your husband."

Countess Irma had overheard this. It was a bitter moment. But for his priestly dignity, she could have turned on the Pater for his impudent speech. "Great happiness !" when her parents were breaking their hearts with shame and remorse ! "Worthily love ?" whilst her mother puzzled her brain as to the best means of annihilating the "truly good man," with withering contempt.

Ilonka, fortunately, said nothing. She never did now. She flitted about the house like a ghost, and no one ever heard her talk or laugh. She carried on her frigidity, even towards her parents. It was very heartless of the child to add to their sorrow by seeming so obviously unhappy ; and she was looking quite plain, so thin and pale had she become.

In the meanwhile, in the kitchen, the gossip had grown apace. That the rich farmer of Kisfalu was on terms of the closest intimacy with my lord was very soon an obvious fact to all. Twice a week, now, he came to the castle, and my lord had been repeatedly heard to call him "my son." On Sundays he always rode over after Mass, and stayed to mid-day meal, just like Pater Ambrosius ; and when Bideskúty and the Pater settled down in the afternoon to their game of "Tarok," András would walk round the garden with the noble Countess and the young lady.

Much had been the gossip, many the conjectures as

to this extraordinary condescension. Gradually, as from the kitchen the news spread to the village, various theories were set up : the most generally believed being that my lord hoped, by shaking hands with the rich peasant, and by treating him as an equal, to win him over to his own views about the steam-mill, and, with András's help and influence, to start it once more on a more prosperous career. At first that idea, originally propounded by Vas Berczi, the village oracle, was treated with derision. Kemény András, in spite of his silence and his taciturnity of the past few months, was still the universal favourite with both sexes, with young and with old ; and the idea that he could, through my lord's flatteries, be bribed over to the devil's side, was flouted as utterly preposterous. But, as weeks went on, and András's visits to the castle were as frequent as ever, and his silence more pronounced, a certain feeling of suspicion, not altogether free from ill-will, gained ground in Árokszállás. There was no doubt that for some time past a change, gradual but unmistakable, had taken place in the popular favourite. At one time his merry laugh could be heard ringing from one end of the village to the other ; now he seldom even smiled. Once he never could look at a pretty girl without trying to snatch a kiss from her, in spite of jealous suitor or anxious parent ; now the village beauties looked vainly at him, with provoking or languishing eyes ; he scarcely seemed to heed them beyond a kind " Good-day ! " and there was a strange look in his eyes as if they perpetually saw something that was not there.

He never now joined his friends on Sunday afternoons in the big barn to listen to cigány music or to twirl the girls round in the csárdás, in his wonted

madcap way. He never now was found at the wayside inn, with pretty Lotti on his knee, making her husband wildly furious with jealousy.

Yes ! he was changed ! of that there was no doubt ! Very sadly changed. The constant intercourse with my lord and his family had accomplished what all old Kemény's money-bags had failed to do : it had made András proud. He no longer cared for the village, its music, its pretty girls, its dancing. He no longer dropped silver florins into the *czigány's* fiddles, or bought bright bits of ribbon for the girls. András was detaching himself from them. He was now the friend of my lord.

Gradually a barrier seemed to arise between him and them, built by unseen hands ; and now, when he came to the village, the younger men took to lifting their caps to him, just as they did to my lord. Even the older ones took to calling him " *kend* " (your Honour), and the girls curtseyed as he passed.

András did not fail to notice the difference. At first he felt it keenly, for he dearly loved his village and his friends ; Etelka saw it, too. She knew the evil would come, creeping apace. It was that which she had dreaded : the gradual detachment of her son from his old life, his helpless striving to live the new. András had at first spoken of it, with tears in his eyes, then, after a while, he seemed not to heed it. Certainly his manner changed. The sunny nature had grown strangely sad, and sadness gave a dignity to the peasant lad, to the tall, broad figure and dreamy eyes, which all the village folk unconsciously recognised, and bowed to, as something noble and high. Then, one day, Jankó came riding down, all excitement, to the village ; the news he had to

How the News was Received 253

tell was so great, so wonderful, he hardly knew how to begin.

András! Kemény András, the rich peasant, the young chap who had sung with them, danced with them, been brought up amongst them, was . . . no! Jankó could not go on! the words seemed to choke him . . . was going to marry. . . .

"Yes! Yes! Whom? Quick, Jankó! Long live András and his future wife! Oh! the sly dog! so silent! so taciturn! that was it, then? Quick, Jankó, who is it? . . . "

And an anxious crowd gathered round Jankó. He was led in triumph to the inn, where a litre of the best wine was placed before him, to help him tell his wonderful news.

"Oh! won't Zsuzsi cry! and what will Panna say? . . . as for Erzsi, she will surely break her heart. Speak, Jankó! is it Erzsi? . . . No? . . . Margit? . . . No? . . . Mariska? . . . No? . . . Speak, Jankó! or may you never speak again!"

Never had news travelled so quickly as that which Jankó came to bring. Kemény András was going to get married! That was the cause of his sorrow, of his silence? Now all would be well again! He would come back to them as merry as ever! and give up going to the castle, and listening to my lord's blandishments! He would have some one to court, some one with whom to dance! Long live Kemény András!

"Jankó, why the devil don't you speak? and why the devil don't you drink? drink, man, and tell us of the lucky girl who will share the Kisfalu money with András, and have the best of husbands into the bargain."

But Jankó would not speak till all were silent again,

and all crowded round him to hear the strange news. Outside the inn, eager, curious faces were peering through the window. Within a breathless silence fell on the excited crowd :

"Kemény András of Kisfalu is about to wed the most noble lady Ilonka of Bideskút !"

It was as if a thunderbolt had come down from heaven, and had fallen crashing in the midst of the village. A dead silence followed the extraordinary announcement, while Jankó drank a deep measure of wine, for his news had made him thirsty.

Then, as the sound of a rising storm, questions, ejaculations, surmises began to be heard right and left :

"Impossible !"

"Jankó, you are a liar !"

"The first of April is long since gone !"

"Kemény András ?"

"Our András ?"

"And her young ladyship ?"

"One of us ?"

"Married to a noble lady ?"

"When did it happen ?"

"How did it happen ?"

"Is he in love with her ?"

"Is she in love with him ?"

All spoke at once. All crowded round Jankó. One pulled his coat tails ; the other tugged at his sleeve. Nobody would let him drink. He must tell something more. He must know more of this strange history.

"Let me go outside where you all can hear, and I will tell you all I know."

"That's right, Jankó !"

"Long live Jankó !"

On to a huge, empty cask, Janko was pushed and

hoisted. He was fully alive to his own importance, the wonders of his news. He viewed, from this height, the number of eager faces turned expectantly towards him. He wiped his mouth with his sleeve, and prepared for an interesting, thrilling speech. But, just as he was about to begin, he spied over the sea of heads Pater Ambrosius coming towards him. He thought that his position was not dignified on the top of a cask; the priest might tell my lord of the way in which his confidential valet announced the news to the village. The noble lord might be angry. Jankó thought it prudent to descend. Pater Ambrosius had pushed his way through the crowd.

"You all seem very excited, my children," he said; "what is it?"

"Kemény András, Pater."

"Oh! that's it, is it? Jankó has already brought the news? and you want to hear all about it. Well, my children, there is not much to say. You all know András, whose heart is as strong as his gold, whose generosity is as great as his riches. Is there one among you here who has not once in the last ten years been in trouble, and gone to András for help? and, having gone, did not get all the help, and ten times more kindness and sympathy than he expected?"

"Yes! Yes! Long live Kemény András! Our András! Yes! Yes!" came from every side, while the gentler sex, more sentimentally inclined, lifted an apron to a moist eye or so.

"Very well, then, my children, you will agree with me that one so good as András—one who follows the dictates of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has taught us to love and succour one another—is surely worthy to wed with the noblest in the land. Kemény András has

wooded the beautiful young lady at Bideskút, and her parents have decided to give her to him."

"Does she love him, Father?" came from the sympathetic, tearful, feminine portion of the audience.

"The noble lady will do her duty as a wife should, and love her husband," replied the old priest, guardedly; "and now will you all go back to your work or to your homes?—and when next András comes to the village you can wish him joy at his future marriage."

But it was useless to talk of work that day. Those who had heard the great news were longing to impart it to others who were away at work on András's land, or that of my lord; whilst others thought they would like to wander out upon the plain and meet the young herdsmen at the inn, and see how they would take the news.

The wise old folk longed for a gossip; the news was great. Every aspect must be discussed. It was all very well for the young ones to be so excited; there was surely no cause for rejoicing. András had made friends with my lord; he had been won over to the enemy's camp. He had turned his back for ever on his friends. His pride had known no bounds. He had used his riches to raise himself above all his equals. Naturally now he would remain among those who had thought fit to welcome the peasant lad as one of themselves because of his great wealth and his lands. András would have a son who, if his mother had been a peasant girl, should have continued his father's traditions of hard work on the fields, merrymaking in the inns, love of dancing and of music, but who now would be reared away from the village, with his heart and mind turned against those who had been his father's friends and companions. Pride is an evil

thing. András was evidently not beyond it. All the empty-headed young things would soon recognise that in future they would have to put up with András's condescension and patronage, which was not worth a particle of András's friendship and gaiety.

He would come to church in a carriage, wearing a frock coat, and discarding the sheepskin mantle; he would help my lady, his wife, out of her coach; he would nod kindly to the young men, who would stand gaping round, with their caps in their hands, and chuck the girls under the chin, who would blush and curtsy. He would surely have to be called "honoured sir," and would set aside so many measures of wheat, which Pater Ambrosius would be told to distribute among the needy. He would not come to cheer the sick and the old in their cottages, with his lively talk and his silver florins, but would send alms through Pater Ambrosius' hands.

"But we will not take it, will we?" added Vas Berczi, bringing his fist crashing down upon the table. "We will show András that we care nothing about his money, since he is too proud to end his days among us, and to find his wife among our daughters."

The feeling of the older part of the population was decidedly antagonistic to the late popular favourite. The whole thing had struck them as too utterly preposterous and wonderful; they did not understand it, and they resented this sudden upsetting of all their ideas on the unattainability of the noble folk. It almost seemed as if somebody had had the temerity to bring down the Saints from Heaven, and taken them for a walk down the village street. The lord of Bideskút and his family were not much loved, for they were too proud to have found their way to popularity, but, at the

same time they were the owners of the land, until very recently the very owners of the peasants' bodies themselves, the lords of the country ; they dispensed the laws ; they were in a sphere above, as far removed from the village folk as the Saints in their niches in the old church. The temerity of one of their kind daring to be at one with them seemed akin to a sacrilege. These older folk wisely shook their heads, and predicted disaster ; such an upheaval of all their social notions would be sure to carry some calamity in its train, and András would live to see sorrow and humiliation follow his pride and temerity.

Outside, the young people did not look far ahead ; they wondered when the wedding was to be, and whether András would ask them all to a huge supper at Kisfalu. They saw in the marriage nothing but the gaieties and festivities of the wedding ceremony, according to ancient traditions, with plenty of wine and dancing, and the best *czigány* music in the county. They half thought of the noble young lady as wearing thirty or forty petticoats, and a pair of brilliant red leather boots, to walk to church with on Sundays, such, in fact, as had never been seen for miles around. The younger ones did not think or talk of temerity and sacrilege, of rising to higher social spheres. To them it was poetry, romance, the willing descent of a great lady to their own humble but merry circle ; the desire of a noble young lady to dance the *csárdás* merrily with them in the big barn, to enjoy herself, to trip barefoot across the muddy roads, to forsake grandeur for gaiety.

They were ready to receive her with open arms, since she wished to come amongst them ; to give her such a welcome in the village on her wedding-day as would

make the vast plain resound with their shouts. As for András, he would have, before his marriage, to make every girl dance till she could not stand, and to make every suitor jealous and every father furious. After that, he would, in the natural course of events, become the jealous husband himself, and the noble wife of the rich farmer would make close acquaintanceship with a certain knotted stick upon her white shoulders.

Ah! good days were coming! Plenty of merry-making, plenty of wine and music. Never had András been so popular among the younger folk, though many tears were shed by pretty eyes at this sudden expiration of secretly treasured hopes.

The old ones croaked and shook their heads; the young ones gossiped, laughed, and cried. There was sorrow at the castle, silence at the farm of Kisfalu, and on a solitary plain a lonely horse and rider roamed about beneath the stars, and a great and good heart was wearing itself out with longing.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE MARRIAGE

"INTROITO ad altare Dei!"

Pater Ambrosius has handed over his biretta to the tiny brown-faced ministrant, and is now bending with reverent head before the high altar, and reciting the opening prayers of the Mass.

Inside the church, the air is heavy with the scent of flowers: roses, roses everywhere, red, white, pink, yellow, in many tones of fragrant loveliness, tied in great posies at the feet of the Virgin's statue, or on the big iron candlesticks, whilst a carpet of many-coloured petals is strewn all down the nave. Half faded, these throw an intoxicating, faint perfume in the air, which mingles with the more penetrating fumes of the incense, as the little ministrants swing their simple censers to and fro. The tiny village church, with its rough stone pillars, its highly-coloured quaint images, its faded altar hangings, is turned into a very bower of sweet-scented blooms. Outside, the day is warm—one of those early May days when the earth gives forth its first promises of coming vintage and harvest, when the air is filled with many cries of innumerable bird throats, when the stork calls loudly to its mate, the swallow is busy in perfecting his nest, the sparrow and the finch twitter in gladness at the warmth, the radiance of the sun. It comes peeping in at the tiny leaded windows

of the church, and alights gaily on the holiday attire of the eager, curious throng of worshippers ; on the bevy of pretty girls on the left, in the smartest of gay-coloured petticoats and embroidered corselets, with black hair smoothly held back underneath the gorgeous head-dress, with eyes no less bright than the glittering beads which encircle their pretty round necks, hang down on plump bosoms, and glisten in tiny ears. It smiles at the crowd of handsome young men, in all the barbaric splendour of their holiday attire, with great bunches of spring flowers fastened to their heavy mantles, their round hats held respectfully in their hands, and adorned with streaming ribbons of national tri-colour.

The Latin text of the Mass is all obscure to them ; the prayer-books are only for show, since few of them can read ; moreover, none could pray to-day, for there is such an extraordinary thing to be seen. All eyes are turned to where, by the communion rail, on a pair of well-worn crimson cushions, there kneel a man and a woman. He, tall, erect, his dark head towering above all others, his great mantle worked in gold and silver threads, falling from his broad shoulders, like the regal mantle of some barbaric chieftain ; she, slender, fragile, in clinging, white muslin, with a long, transparent veil, disguising the chaste young form, and through which a few glints of golden curls can occasionally be seen. Side by side they kneel, enveloped in the penetrating smoke of the incense, with roses all round them—at their feet, in half-faded masses, on the chancel rail and steps, in great heavy bunches, thrown everywhere by hands unaccustomed to fashion decoration, but in grotesque picturesqueness of untidiness and plenty—side by side, to receive the blessing of

God and the Church on this union decreed on them by the high Fate which shapes our destinies. The girl, with tiny ice-cold hands clutching nervously at the ivory-bound prayer-book, trying to follow the obscure meaning of the Latin text, her blue eyes fixed steadfastly down on the pages, with not a tear falling from beneath the heavy lids ; the man, upright and proud, with strong arms crossed tightly across his broad chest, forcing his eyes to rest on the sacred vessels, the altar before him, and not to dwell on that girlish figure by his side, whose every movement sends the flames of heaven coursing through his veins. The long folds of her veil disguise her before him, but, beneath it, he can guess the golden curls, the delicate outline of nose and chin, the slender, graceful curves of the throat, and his arms tighten across his breast, till the strong sinews crack, as if to still the exultant beating of the heart, and force the mind to reverence and prayer.

Pater Ambrosius, bending still lower, has begun to recite the "Confiteor" ; his lean hand strikes his breast :

"Mea culpa ! mea culpa ! mea maxima culpa !"

Immediately behind them my lord kneels, with figure slightly bent, as if under some terrible weight too heavy for man to bear ; he looks aristocratic and still young, among all these heavily-built sons of the soil, in his tight-fitting frock-coat, buttoned close up to the neck. At the "Confiteor" a great sigh, which sounds almost like a sob, breaks through his tightly compressed lips.

"Indulgentiam, absolutionem et remissionem peccatorum nostrorum, tribuat nobis omnipotens et misericors Deus !"

His hands are convulsively clasped. He, too, prays

to God for pardon for all transgressions, all obstinacies, pride, and vain-glory, all the follies which have thrust his dainty, high-born child into the arms of a peasant.

The noble Countess, in antiquated silk which stands in rigid folds round her, has recited the "Confiteor" under her breath, out of her prayer-book, merely as a concession, for she stands in no need of absolution, or of remission. She has accomplished her duty, sacrificed her very pride, her own child, her most treasured traditions, for the sake of her husband's honour and the future of her race.

Then the worthy old priest mounts the altar steps; his new vestments, covered with lace and embroideries (a present from András for the great occasion), impede his movements. He stumbles and almost falls, causing a titter among the giddy young folk at the back, while old ones shake their heads and make the sign of the Cross, for the omen forebodes nothing good. The tension of suspense, of excitement, is so acute that the most trivial occurrence calls forth nervous merri-ment, or flood of tears.

In the meanwhile the Pater is reading the beginning of the Introit—

"Deus Israel conjugat vos . . ."

András listens reverently. Yesterday the kind old priest had patiently gone through every word of the wedding Mass with him, so that he might understand what God enjoined him to do, and what he would swear to fulfil.

"May the God of Israel unite you!"

Yesterday, when he had read these words, they had seemed to him as words spoken by angels, when opening the gates of paradise.

The band of gipsy players, inseparable from any Hungarian function, grave or gay, has been stationed at the further end of the church. They know little of hymn or psalm tune; their music consists of dreamy Hungarian songs, which they play with soft, sighing sounds, and which fill the tiny, roughly-built church as with an appealing whisper.

András closes his eyes. He has promised the Pater to keep his thoughts in check, to turn them wholly upon the sacred function, upon God's blessing, worthily to be received.

The mellow tones of the *czimbalom*, the sighing accents of the fiddles, fill the air; the half-audible mutterings of Pater Ambrosius as he reads the Gospel, recites the Creed and Offertory prayers, all seem like sounds in dreamland, far removed from reality.

And still, as in a dream, through the thickening clouds of incense, András watches the priest as he pronounces the sacred words of the consecration. The tiny bell tingles and all heads are reverently bent: from Ilonka's eyes a few tears are slowly falling upon her prayer-book. Before him, there floats a vision of the home at Kisfalu, rendered radiant with the presence of his young wife, flitting fairy-like through the low-raftered rooms, and . . . then . . . of the patter of feet, tinier even than hers, skipping merrily about the house, and of fresh, shrill voices, shouting "father" when he comes home. An infinite peace is in his heart; forgotten are the torrents of passion which had well-nigh overwhelmed him in these last weary weeks; he only thinks of her as he does of the Madonna, serene, pure, the fountain of happiness—she sitting on a throne aloft, dispensing joys to the homestead: he worshipping, devoted, at her feet.

But now Pater Ambrosius is descending the altar steps; my lord has also left his seat, and is standing erect and very pale, close to the communion rails, while one of the ministrants holds a small plate in his hands on which two gold circlets glisten.

A sound, which is like a long sigh, seems to come from the hundred throats in the church, a sigh of intense, eager expectancy. András and Ilonka are standing before the priest, about to finally become man and wife. Neither of them hears what the priest says. Both feel as in a dream. Behind, all necks are craned to catch a glimpse of the two figures, one so tall and broad, the other so fragile; one or two less reverent feet are standing up on the pews, while a nervous whisper and titter, a frou-frou of starched skirts, a jingle of beads and bangles, breaks the solemn silence of the church.

Binecz Markó and his band are playing a dreamy song, a quaint, half-sad melody; they whisper on their instruments; the music sounds like one long sigh, hardly audible, as if coming from some distant cloud-land, and wafted in on the smoke of the incense.

Pater Ambrosius has taken the tiny, cold, white hand, and the other, strong, brown, and rough, and placed one within the other. András hardly dares to breathe. Surely this cannot be reality. Pater Ambrosius holds both the hands clasped together, but through it all András feels a flutter, like the wings of a tiny bird, just stolen from its nest. As her hand touches his, her white face has become whiter still, and for one swift moment her blue eyes have sought his own, with a terror-stricken, appealing look, that makes András's heart well-nigh break with pity. Did she not understand, then, that he loved her—as saints had loved their

God—and that he would tend and cherish her, and keep every sorrow from her path? Did they not tell her how he had begged for leave to lie at her feet, to keep stormy weather and arid sun from her ways, and then be content to see her smile? Why did she then look so appealingly at him? It seemed almost as if she were frightened! Frightened? Great and mighty Lord! when her hand rested in his! and God Himself was entrusting her to his care, to shield and to protect!

Pater Ambrosius now places the golden circlets, one in the hand of each. Then he whispers to András to slip the one he holds on the finger of one of those white hands. The Pater says something, which András repeats after him. There is a great deal about loving and cherishing, sickness and death, evil and good: András repeats it all, as in a dream; only vaguely does he understand that he is taking an oath before God and before men. What need has he of oaths, when his very heart-strings are bound up in the fulfilment of his own happiness?

Then she begins to speak. She also repeats what Pater Ambrosius says before her. Her voice—oh! it was the sweetest music—sounds hardly above a whisper . . . hardly above the dying murmur of the czimbalom as it faintly echoes through the sacred edifice. She also swears, as with icy hands she holds the ring on his finger, to love, to honour, and to obey.

Firmly, triumphantly, sounds the "Yes!" spoken by András in reply, when God through the mouth of his priest, the law as represented by the Church, asks if he will have this woman for wife. His answer is like the triumphant echo, the expression of all his pent-up passion, of his longing, his deep, his infinite love. Firmly she, too, answers "Yes!"; her voice

does not tremble, but once again two great tears detach themselves from her eyes, and fall, like glistening dew-drops, down her cheek.

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A great sigh of satisfaction broke from the crowd of worshippers. The irrevocable deed had been done. Kemény András, the peasant lad whom, as a tiny boy, many a homely mouth had kissed, who older in years had been buffeted and beaten by a tyrannical father, had toiled on farm and field as any labourer, who was one of themselves, like them, born and bred on the good Hungarian lowlands, was now and for ever the rightful lord and master of a noble high-born lady, the daughter of him who owned the land, the descendant of those who had owned the very peasants as their goods and chattels, to sell and barter at will, to maltreat, or even to kill. How wonderful it was! Like some grand dream, dreamt by all alike—the lights, the roses, the beautiful new vestments; the lord of Bideskút standing there, giving his daughter away to the peasant lad; the beautiful lady, all in white, looking like a saint, stepped down from one of the images; and amidst them all the powerful figure, the handsome dark head, bronzed by years of hard toil on the land, beneath the arid sun, the hard, rugged hands ever opened wide to pour kindnesses, money, gifts, to all who needed it, and who never asked in vain. It was a glorious day, a great event! so great and glorious that not one eye remained dry, not one throat unchoked with sobs; so great and glorious that the *czigány* poured forth on the heavy, scented air their most sad, most appealing melodies! So great and glorious that the chief actors therein, that powerful man and that

fragile girl, were both bowing with bursting hearts and tearful eyes before the all-kind, merciful throne of God !

The rest of the Mass was listened to in silence. Dreamy quiet rested upon all. The simple words of the Lord's Prayer, though spoken in Latin, were known and felt by the humblest, the most unlettered in the flock. András had knelt down on the faded cushion. He had buried his face in his hands ; before his closed eyes there was a haunting vision of that terrified look which had implored him for pity. That vision seemed to rend his heart-strings. He held his teeth firmly set together, lest heart-breaking sobs should escape his throat. She was kneeling so listlessly, so icily beside him now. Reverently each took the white wafer, which Pater Ambrosius had placed in their mouth. In simple faith the young peasant accepted the great mystery which the Catholic Church commands her children to believe. He did not understand, but did not question ; scarcely a faint doubt crossed his fevered mind. The faded flowers seemed to make him drowsy ; Binecz Markó's plaintive music lulled him to dreamy insensibility.

Then Pater Ambrosius raised his hands aloft :

"May the God of Abraham, the God of Israel, the God of Jacob be with you ; may He pour forth upon you the continual dew of His blessing, so that ye may see the children of your children even unto the third and fourth generation, and that ye may be possessed at the last with eternal life, through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, who liveth and reigneth with God the Father and the Holy Ghost, world without end. Amen!"

And he added, making the sign of the Cross towards the assistants :

"Benedicat vos omnipotentes Deus Pater, et Filius, et Spiritus Sanctus."

The last "Amen" died away; the last Gospel had been read; Pater Ambrosius was wiping the sacred vessels.

Among the worshippers, the long, religiously kept silence was at last threatening to break. Excited whispers were heard among the young folk, as well as a general noise of closing the clasps of prayer-books, short, nervous coughing, and an occasional titter. Respectfully, all remained in their seats, but craned their necks to catch sight of the bride and bridegroom, and of the noble people. Eager questions were asked, excited comments made. Pater Ambrosius came down to the communion rail; with fatherly freedom he had taken the bride's pale young face between his wrinkled hands, and looking straight into her innocent eyes was whispering something to her: a last admonition, a quiet prayer. Then he turned towards András and took his hand in both his own, and all heard him say: "God bless you, my son, you have well deserved your happiness!" After that, he put on his biretta, and was gone.

The noble Countess had gathered up her shawl and prayer-book, and had drawn near to Ilonka. Every one strained their necks to watch the critical moment. In true time-honoured Hungarian tradition András, with a hand which visibly trembled, lifted the veil from his young bride's face, and, stooping down towards her, his face as pale as death, he imprinted the first kiss on the pure forehead of his newly-made wife.

She seemed whiter than the white roses in her hair. Her eyes closed. She seemed ready to swoon. He had had the first kiss as every bridegroom on the lowlands:

and yet, how hungrily he watched as her father and mother, each in turn, took her in their arms, and the noble Countess wiped copious tears from her maternal eyes. It seemed as if he could not allow any one to approach her now.

The comments flowed freely. Feminine hearts ached at the sad, white look of the bride. But then, all brides are coy and frightened on their wedding-day : it is their great charm ; and András would soon bring a blush to those cheeks, and brilliancy to those eyes.

How handsome they both looked as they walked down the nave ; her hand hardly touching his arm as he led her towards the door. Softly murmured " God bless you both ! " accompanied them to the porch. Then, behind my lord and his lady, the crowd closed in to see the departure.

For one moment András paused, as the brilliance of the May-day sun half dazzled his eyes. Down the road, my lord's carriage, with its Hungarian livery, in its scarlet leather harness, its five milk-white horses that had brought the bride to the church were eagerly, impatiently pawing the ground. The crowd, like the overflowing waters of the Tarna, had pressed its way out of the church, now much too small to contain all the people. All rushed eagerly forward, looking round for the rich peasant's carriage, which was sure to be gorgeous beyond description, since it would convey the noble bride to her new farmhouse home, with glittering harness, and with its shiny brass bosses and silver hasps, that would shame that of the lord of Bideskút ; moreover, no stables could rival the horses from Kisfalu. The Countess, too, was looking inquiringly down the road, and anxiously at András, for no car-

riage but hers was in sight. What was András waiting for with his young wife on his arm?

Suddenly, there was a loud start, a quick pawing of the air and the road, a whirl and a shout, and before the village folk's delighted gaze, and the noble Countess's cry of horror, Kemény András, with one quick gesture, had picked his young bride up in his arms, had jumped on Csillag's back, and, before the spectators had time to realise what had happened, or the Countess to recover from the shock, the mare, with her double burden, was far away, throwing up a cloud of loose earth with her hoofs, galloping away towards the plain, her mane flying in the wind.

A gigantic cry of "Long live!" that shook the very foundations of the tiny village church, sent its echoes after the fast-disappearing horse and rider; such a cry as relieved the tension of the intense excitement of the last two hours, and was the fitting, barbaric, primitive, intensely human comment on this novel home-going of a Hungarian bride.

CHAPTER XXV

FATA MORGANA

Oh ! the delights of that wild ride across the roads, amid the fields of the beautiful Hungarian lowlands, with Csillag feeling, as it were, the same magnetic current which filled her master's veins, and flying along, swift and sure, like the very clouds driven by the wind.

Oh ! how he had looked forward to this ride, with her frightened arms clinging perforce to him, for she would have to hold on tight when Csillag flew like the wind.

How pale she looked ! Her eyes were closed : perhaps she had fainted away. He had been forced to be brusque and rough, to mount Csillag and fly away with her, and give no one time to stop him, and this, no doubt, had frightened her.

On Csillag flew, the village was far behind ! the shouts of " Eljen ! " had died away ; the plain, in all its immensity, in all its loneliness, lay before him, and Csillag who, like her master, loved its untrammelled freedom, loved the vast expanse of earth and sky, bounded onwards, as if God's angels had lent her their wings.

On ! On ! She lay so still and so pale in his arms ; scarcely a breath escaped the partially closed mouth ; her long white veil lay round her like a shroud, and

her tiny head rested upon his breast. Of such a moment he had dreamt long nights through, upon the plain, had half broken his heart with mad desire longing for this. And now he gazed upon her for the first time all alone. No eyes to watch his emotion ; her loveliness lying passive in his arms. Oh ! the joy of seeing her thus, senseless, helpless, against his breast ; fondly his eyes dwelt on every soft curl which escaped from beneath the veil, on the closed transparent lids, where tiny purple veins spoke of sorrow and of tears, on the small white nose, with its dainty tip and delicate nostrils, and, above all, on that scarlet mouth, with lips half parted, through which András's ardent gaze sought the tiny white teeth and the tip of her rosy tongue.

Oh ! it was joy unspeakable, joy beyond compare—save to most exquisite torture—to drink in every line of that fragile beauty, of which he was now the owner, and which, for very love, for great desire, he would not, dare not touch.

On, Csillag ! On !

She had not stirred ; her very breath seemed to have stopped. She lay as dead in his arms. All around, earth and sky were still. The noonday sun poured down its radiance on the vast immensity of the plains. The heat made the air tremble with its waves. All signs of human life were far, very far away. The tiny wayside inn lay behind, the cry of the herdsmen was heard no more ; only overhead the storks were calling to one another, and down from beneath the great leaves of the melons, bright-coloured lizards darted to and fro, frightened by Csillag's mad gallop. A fragrance of opening blossoms, of ripening fruit, was in the air. To the right a herd of wild horses cantered

swiftly past. András looked up for a moment, gazed round at the solitary, silent plain which he loved so well, and his eyes rested with delight on the blue sky, the ruddy soil, the distant outline of the long-armed well, against the purple mist beyond.

And lo ! as he gazed on the hot, dry, trembling air, far away, upon the infinite golden distance, with rapid touches, the fitful fairy Fata Morgana drew her elusive pictures. To András's excited brain, it seemed like the gold and white city of paradise glistening in the radiance of the sun ; with cool, rippling streams, marble towers, and green pastures, glorious and solitary, calling to him to enter, with that snow-white burden in his arms there, to lay him down, and her, beside the cool streams, his burning head resting against that soft green grass.

Long and earnestly he gazed, while it seemed to him as if Csillag flew thither with outstretched angels' wings. Nearer and nearer the enchanting picture drew, half-veiled in a thin mist, which was made of tears.

Then he bent his head down, and his ardent lips sought the tiny half-opened mouth : and the soul of the young, rough, half-barbaric peasant passed from him to her inanimate form, in one long, burning kiss.

Far out, on the horizon, the fitful fairy had swiftly erased the golden image of that paradise city ; overhead the storks had ceased their cry ; the little lizards had gone to rest.

Peaceful, immense, solitary, the *puszta* lay—and Csillag galloped on.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE PEASANT'S WIFE

“THERE! there! there! let her be, my boy. She will be all right with me. You leave her here. The sheets are warm and soft, and scented with lavender. You go down to the cellar and get me a measure of that vinegar I put into casks last November. Put it outside the door, and bring me from the attic some cloves, and thyme, and perhaps a little burrage. Now go! I tell you she is only faint, with that madcap ride of yours. You should have done as other folks do, and brought her home in a cart, with steady oxen to pull her along!”

It was long after mid-day when András came home on Csillag's back, carrying a white burden in his arms. Etelka had been waiting to welcome the bride home, and had cooked such a meal as was fit to place before the king himself, for she wanted Sári and Kati to have the treat of putting on their best clothes and seeing their master being wed to the noble young lady. She could not help feeling anxious, for she knew of her son's intention of bringing his bride home in his arms, flying on Csillag's back, and feared lest the noble young lady, unaccustomed to such summary proceedings, should become faint and ill. She had made the tiny farmhouse look like a perfect garden of loveliness. Her roses, fortunately, were in full bloom, and she had

been able to place great bunches of them in every room, more especially in the one which, newly papered and ornamented with daintily embroidered curtains, had been destined for the young wife.

Ah! there, at last, the distant and well-known sound of Csillag's hoofs on the soft earth outside. Excitedly Etelka hurried out to the porch, ready to welcome her new daughter home with a loving kiss. One look in her son's face told her that something was amiss. Gently, with the pretty trick her master had taught her, Csillag had dropped on her knees, and András, looking almost as white as the burden he was carrying, dismounted and went within.

He laid her down on the bed, Etelka helping him to pillow the golden head softly on the cushions. She looked so white and inanimate. No wonder András was frightened. But Etelka understood that excitement alone had caused a dead faint, and soon reassured her son. She tried to remain cheerful, while she was in the room, but when he had gone, she shook her head sadly. Never had she seen any one so pale and wan looking, and this strange home-coming foreboded nothing good to her mind.

András had brought the vinegar, and Etelka, having placed it on the stove to warm, and throwing some aromatic herbs into it, began bathing Ilonka's temples with it. She took off the poor child's shoes and stockings, and rubbed her cold feet between her own rough hands. At last a faint tremulous sigh escaped the purple lips. The golden head moved restlessly on the pillow, and soon a pair of frightened blue eyes looked up at the wrinkled, kind face above them.

Terrified, puzzled, they roamed round, trying—just home from the land of dreams,—to take in the imme-

diate reality: the quaint, tiny room, with its low-raftered ceiling, from which hung bunches of dry sweet-scented herbs. The great stove of glazed earthenware, brilliant and green, with the hot vessel of aromatic vinegar steaming upon it. The posies of white roses in great rough pots, and the quaint figure of the kind old woman with the large dark eyes, which reminded Ilonka of something she had hoped for ever to forget.

But the face looked good and sympathetic, and Ilonka just now had sore need of comfort. Her heart felt numb and bruised, and the old, dark eyes had two great tears in them that spoke of love and pity. All had been so strange, so bewildering. Ilonka had lived in such an atmosphere of stern duty and proud bearing for the last few weeks that the simple peasant clothes, the kind, wrinkled face, the rough brown hands, the sympathetic tears went straight to that bruised young heart, and she put out both her arms in an appeal for comfort and for love.

The old peasant woman's heart, which had already gone out to the fragile, girlish figure on the bed, quite melted at this sweet appeal. Her arms closed round the delicate young girl, the golden head rested on the old motherly breast, and on it there fell such a shower of kisses and such words of love and sympathy as Ilonka had never heard from her own mother's lips.

"Now, my sweet one, you feel better, do you not? Lie still for a while, and rest; you are tired and excited. See, I will draw the curtains across these windows, and shut out the sun, which will be setting presently, and you will perhaps get a good long sleep. I will be at my spinning in the room next to this. If you want anything, you must just tap the wall with

your hand. I shall hear. I have aired all your beautiful linen, and hung your dresses up in that wardrobe, so when you are rested you can slip off your white frock, and put on some of your nice new things which my lady your mother sent down with the cart yesterday. There! is that pillow just right, under your head? . . . Good-night, my sweet one. . . . Sleep well! . . . ”

She gave Ilonka a last kiss, drew the curtains across the windows so that the rays of the sun only came in softened and subdued; then she slipped quietly out of the room.

Ilonka was alone. At first she was only conscious of an exquisite sense of bodily well-being. The sheets were so fine, and smelt so sweetly of lavender and rosemary, the air was deliciously fragrant with the scent of roses and lilies of the valley. She closed her eyes; her body lay rigid in an exquisite feeling of rest. How tired she was of all the turmoil and excitement of the past few days, of the maids bustling round, sorting the new linen and the various dresses, of the white gown which had to be tried on several times, and which always gave her a pain in her heart whenever she felt its clinging folds round her. But above all, she was infinitely weary of all the talk about wealth and lands, duties and posterity. Her cheeks had been in one perpetual flame, hearing herself spoken of but as the mother of unborn children, who were to be rich and own all the land and all the money.

She had fought for liberty in an earnest, gentle way, had tried to appeal to her parents' love for her, their pride in her, their contempt for the husband they had chosen for her. She cared nothing for great riches, or for broad leagues of land; she was happy at Bideskút,

and would soon get over the shame of being an old maid. She could not understand why her father always looked so sad when her future was talked about. If he did not like his daughter's marriage with the rich peasant, why did he allow it? Surely he had lands, fields, money enough of his own. What did he want with a peasant's wealth, be it ever so great? Ilonka could not understand. Her mother, who was so proud, seemed to look on the *mésalliance* with content, while scorning the idea of a penniless husband, even if he had a long line of ancestry. The child had soon told her long-cherished secret, had candidly admitted the thrills of delight which one voice among all others had called forth in her young heart. She was an only child, had been much loved and petted. It seemed terrible she should have to live in a peasant's cottage, learn to spin and dig in the garden, become no better than one of the maids, and cut off from all her friends.

Then one day they told her that *he* did not care; that he, being poor, was about to wed a rich manufacturer's daughter, who was willing to exchange her bags of gold for a Countess's coronet. After that Ilonka was passive. She did not mind what they decided for her. Since *he* had lied to her, had talked of love, which he said would last till death, and had ended in a year, if *he* was false and dishonourable, she did not care what happened to her. If she could not be happy, she might as well do what her mother and father wished, and give her hand to the peasant, who was not more sordid than *he*, in wishing to have a noble lady as his wife.

Ilonka, with closed eyes, lying there passively on the rosemary-scented bed, recalled her first meeting

with the tall, picturesque man : with him who had been described to her as the rich and vulgar peasant in search of noble blood, to which to ally his own common nature. She recalled his strange personality, his deep, musical voice, his eyes which rested so strangely upon her, the kiss which he always imprinted on her hand, and which used to bring a hot flush to her cheek, and a feeling that was half faint, half horrible.

She tried to recall every moment of that solemn hour in church, the vows she spoke, the prayers she repeated, kneeling beside that strange man, whom, in spite of his origin, she could not despise, for he was so tall, and so quiet in his ways, and had such a curious masterful look in his eyes.

A shudder went through her now as it did then, when she felt the gold circlet of metal being slipped on her finger, the badge of her slavery to this man, who, her mother said, was infinitely beneath her.

And she had sworn to honour, to love, and to obey. Oh ! she would do the latter to the utmost of her capacity, do his every bidding, work as any serf had worked in days gone by, when bitter blows were all the wage for a heavy day's toil ; and she would bear his arrogance, his masterfulness, be a willing and cheerful slave to him. Fulfil this oath—then perhaps God would remit the other, for she had sworn that which she could not fulfil : she had sworn that she would love. Then a last picture floated before her mind, a picture the reality of which in itself seemed as a dream : a picture of many faces floating round her, and in front the tiny village, with its thatched cottages, under the glare of a glorious May-day sun : the air hot and heavy with the fragrance of early opening blossoms, and filled with sounds of bees and birds, neigh-

ing of colts, and bleating of lambs. Then, suddenly, she had felt herself lifted off her feet, and flying through the air as if on cloud wings. She dimly remembered a long shout, which died away in the distance as she flew, then something strong and tight seemed to hold her faster, closer; the acacia trees, the cottages, the throng of moving faces, appeared a thing of the infinite past, and she remembered no more.

Oh, why had consciousness come back to her! Why had she ever wakened? She had been in infinite peace; why had not that peace lasted on and on, till the cloud wings had carried her to those regions where rest is eternal?

CHAPTER XXVII

THE IRREPARABLE

THE sun was sinking low down in the west, and its golden rays stole in by the little windows of the living room and adorned each object in it with a narrow edge of gold, like a halo.

Etelka had laid aside her spinning. The mid-day meal had been left untasted, and she had thought out some dainty dishes to prepare for supper, with her own hands, since Sári and Kati were too full of the wedding and all they had seen to be trusted with the cooking of the first meal the young wife would take in her new home.

She had seemingly not yet stirred. Etelka had peeped into the room, and seen her lying peacefully, with a faint colour in her cheeks, regular breathing coming through her half-opened mouth. Reassured, she had left András to watch in the parlour, and had hurried to her kitchen.

Dreamily he sat beside the open window gazing out across the plain towards the setting sun. . . . Thus his mind had always pictured this day of all days : The house still and solitary. He alone with her ; she with him. They two together, for ever henceforth, as one ; loving and loved ; sharing sorrows and joys ; all in all to each other. He remembered his lonely childhood, his early years, when, tired with hard, slavish

toil, his young shoulders bruised and aching from unjust and heavy blows from his father's stick, he used to wander out on the lonely plain, lonelier even than he, and alone betwixt earth and sky, alone with the moon and stars, he had asked beautiful, loving Nature to tell him some of her secrets : to teach him why the stork called always for its mate, why the swallow toiled to build a nest, why even the little lizards had their homes beneath the great leaves of the melons, and why he, in spite of all the great love he bore his mother, felt lonely and homeless. Now he knew. He understood Nature's great all-pervading lesson, of a dual existence which is as one, a lesson which neither father nor mother could teach him, but which he had learnt when first he saw the fairy vision that had become his dream, and first heard the voice which had been angel's music in his ear. Like the stork, he, too, called for his mate ; like the swallow, he longed for a home wherein to love her, to cherish her, of which she would be queen.

A faint noise behind him made him turn his head. It was she, all in white, dimly outlined in the gathering gloom. She had laid aside her veil, but was still in her wedding dress.

" Ilonka ! "

Evidently she had not expected to find him here, for she started, stopped short, and her hand sought the support of the table near her as if she were afraid to fall.

" Ilonka ! " he said again, and came close to where she stood.

She drew back a step or two.

" I thought . . . I . . . I did not know you were here. "

" My mother was here till just now, " he said very

gently ; " seeing that you were fast asleep, she has gone to the kitchen and left me here to watch if you stirred."

He tried to take her hand and to draw her to him, but she snatched it away and said hurriedly :

" Where is the kitchen? I will go and find her."

" The kitchen is in an outhouse, sweet, over there in the garden. The house is solitary and still, and we are alone, you and I."

Again he tried to take her hand, but she evaded him, and turned nervously to the door.

" Oh ! I can find my way ; she will want me, I know. She . . . "

But swiftly András had placed himself in her way, and with a sudden, passionate movement, his arms closed round her.

" She does not need your help, sweet," he whispered earnestly, " and you cannot go . . . see ! you are a prisoner in my arms. . . . Oh ! do not struggle . . . for I hold you tight. How pale you look and how scared !

. . . Are you frightened ? . . . Not now, surely, when you are in my arms ! . . . I can protect you, sweet, from every sorrow and every ill. . . . Bend down and let your tiny ear touch my mouth . . . for I want to whisper something into it . . . something, Ilonka, which has so filled my heart for many weary months that it has well-nigh broken it, for striving to be told. . . . Ilonka . . . my own . . . my sweet wife . . . I love you."

His voice sounded hoarse and strange. His arms held her as in a vice. He was drawing her closer, faster to him, till his face was near to her own. Ilonka fought to free herself. She was surprised and terri-

fied. She did not understand. Never had she heard a voice so strange, nor met a look which frightened her so. Her mother should have warned, told her she would have to listen, would have to allow this odious peasant to put his arms round her, as he no doubt did to the village girls at the inn. She felt humiliated, horrified, her sharp nails were dug into his hands in a frantic effort to force him to let her go.

"I forbid you . . . I forbid you ! . . ." was all that she could gasp, for her throat was choked with terror. But he seemed not to heed. He repeated, in a curious way, "Ilonka . . . I love you ! . . ." as if the words almost choked him. And those words, in his mouth, sent a thrill of revolt through her ; they were the self-same words which, in those happy times, a gentle voice had murmured with respectful tenderness in her ear, and had caused her then such divine happiness.

"I forbid you !" she repeated mechanically.

His grasp relaxed slightly, and she could see that he smiled.

"Forbid me, sweet ! what will you forbid ? Do you then not wish to hear me tell you of the great love I bear you ? . . . Remember, that for all these weeks I hardly dared approach you. Some one was always there, who seemed to chase away all words of love from my mouth. . . . For weeks now, I have hardly dared to look at you. It would be cruel to forbid me to speak . . . now . . . that, at last, we are alone . . . now . . . that you are . . . my wife !"

With a swift and sudden movement, she had succeeded in freeing herself from his grasp. Erect and defiant, she stood before him, all the arrogance, the pride of the aristocrat in revolt against the daring of this presumptuous peasant. He looked so tall and so

powerful in all his bearing ; in his look there was such an air of indomitable will, of almost tyrannical masterfulness, that Ilonka unconsciously remembered the oath she swore, to honour and to obey ; and also the silent compact with her heart, to give full obedience, since she could give no love.

" Yes ! Yes, I know," she said slowly, with a certain defiant humility. " I understand, and will try not to forget. I am your wife ; and this morning, at the altar, I swore an oath that I would obey you. My mother and father commanded and I did as they desired. I swore that I would obey, and I will keep that oath, never fear ! I will be a dutiful wife. I will work for you as no peasant woman could ever work. I will spin, and I will dig ; walk to church with you, and distribute to the labourers their measures of wine and corn. You must teach me my duties ; command me, and I will obey. . . . You need have no fear. . . . I know . . . I am your wife !"

András was gazing at her, half bewildered. He did not quite understand what she said. She looked very beautiful, save for the strange look in her eyes. He could not read what that look meant. It certainly had nothing of terror in it ; and her voice, too, was clear and distinct, and each word she said seemed to strike at his heart, making it throb with pain. The shades of evening were closing in. He could not see her very distinctly. Her slim form looked quite ghost-like in the gathering gloom.

She had paused a moment, while he murmured " Ilonka !" as if in a tender appeal. He would have spoken and tried to draw near to her again, but with an imperious gesture she put up her hand.

" Do not speak," she said haughtily. " Just now I

could not stop you. You held me tightly. I tried to protest. But you had your say. It is my turn now. You said there were many things you wished to tell me. Things which, when you said them, made my cheeks burn with shame. I did not know—I am an ignorant girl—and my mother did not tell me—that it was part of this hideous bargain that you should speak to me of love, and that I should have to listen to words which, in your mouth, must be a sacrilege !”

“ Ilonka ! ”

One great and mighty cry, heart-rending in its intensity. The cry of the wounded beast, struck unto death, and sending forth in the air its last piteous appeal.

Was she in her senses? Did she know what she was saying? Was it consciously that she had struck this terrible blow, so deadly that, for a moment, he almost staggered beneath it? He looked at the outline of her young figure, dimly discernible in the darkness. So slender, white, and fragile did it look, that, in the midst of his great pain, an infinite pity for her seized him. No! No! she could not understand. She was ill and excited. Her brain was in a fever. Terror, in the midst of the strange surroundings, the lonely farmhouse, the small low room, had blinded her. He had been hot-headed and impetuous. Poor, tender little thing, what could she know of a man's passion? how could she understand the overmastering intensity of a rough peasant's love? He was rough! All Pater Ambrosius' education had not quite eradicated the hot, impatient temperament of the son of the soil; and she, refined, aristocratic, hitherto surrounded by the calm devotion of her parents, the deference of her servants, the respectful courtship of high-born suitors, had been

frightened by it all. No wonder she shrank from his sudden, brutal, clumsy ways.

"Ilonka," he began very gently, forcing his voice not to tremble, so as to reassure her, "many things have frightened you to-day. . . . You are still weak and ill, and I do not think that you are able to realise the cruelty of your last words to me. . . . Let me take you to your room now. . . . My mother said that you would require a great deal of rest . . . and perhaps I was rough and clumsy with you . . . just now. . . . I am but a peasant, as you know . . . but I can be gentle. . . . And, oh! I would sooner cut off my right hand than offend or frighten you in any way. . . . Will you forgive me? See . . . it is this great love that overwhelms me . . . that almost obscures my brain . . . and, perhaps . . . I lose control of my arms, when they close round you . . . and of my voice, when I speak to you. . . . I am quite calm now, my sweet; will you let me take your hand?"

"Is it necessary?" she asked.

"Necessary, Ilonka? do you not wish to place your hand in mine? Will you not try to give me one gentle word? . . . I do not ask for very much . . . I will wait . . . oh! with infinite patience, for a word of love from you. . . . You are exquisitely beautiful. My love for you sprung in my heart the day on which I first beheld your loveliness. I am a common peasant . . . it will take time, I know, to win your love for me. . . . But I will win it, with such infinite gentleness that your heart will open to the poor peasant who so humbly worships you. But until then, my sweet, I will not complain. . . . I will be content if you will place your tiny hand in mine . . . just for one moment, of your own accord . . . "

He held out his hand towards her.

"You will not do this, Ilonka? Have I then offended you so deeply that you have devised this terrible punishment for me? If so, believe me, dear, the punishment has been enough; for the fault I committed was in the intensity of my love, and that love you have wounded so deeply that it now lies bruised and sore at your feet. . . . You will not stretch out your hand towards me? . . . You will not say that you forgive . . . even if I . . . pray for that forgiveness on my knees . . . ?"

He had knelt down at her feet; and in the darkness his burning lips had sought and found the small, ice-cold hand. She snatched it away as if she had been stung, with a sudden cry of horror and loathing.

In a moment András was on his feet again. That sudden gesture, that cry of horror, were not the outcome of girlish coyness, or childish fear. There was something more, hidden within the heart of the woman before him, something that was not calm and icy as her words, and as her look; and in the gloom he tried to see more of her face than its bare outline. But it was too dark; her head was entirely in shadow, and he could not read what was passing within. With sudden, fierce masterfulness, he seized both her wrists.

"You do not hate me, Ilonka?"

There was dead silence in the room. The moon had just crept round over the lonely farmhouse, and her slanting rays found their way through the low casement windows. Outside, the leaves of the poplar trees trembled in the evening breeze, giving forth a melancholy sound like a long-drawn-out sigh. She was silent: and suddenly he remembered how it was thus that he had always pictured the evening of this

glorious day—the house solitary and still ; his mother gone to her room, leaving him alone with her. He remembered how he had pictured her : coy, frightened at first, then listening to his love, her blue eyes getting gradually moist with pity and responsive passion, her lips parting in a happy smile. Oh, the bitter irony of it all ! the cruelty of this awakening from the long, beautiful dream !

“ Ilonka, will you answer me ? ” he pleaded.

She did not try to free her wrists, but drew herself to her full height, and stepped quite close to him, letting each word sound distinctly in his ear :

“ Hate you, Kemény András ? ” she began slowly and earnestly ; “ hatred is a big word, as great a one as love ; I am a very young girl, and have seen nothing of the world beyond the walls of my father’s castle of Bideskút, and therefore perhaps I know nothing of either. But this I do know : that in order to hate, one must be able to love. And I could never love you. You, with your great wealth, your fields, your lands, and your gold, had little else in the world to desire. But in your ambitious heart there remained one arrogant thought : you were not content to see one of your own kind, low-born and sordid as yourself, sharing with you that wealth which all peasants hold so dear. Since your money could not place you above your station, you longed at least that at the head of your table there should be seated one whom your labourers would call ‘ my lady,’ and that in one castle, at least, in the lowlands, you should be welcomed almost as an equal. With what machinations, what treachery, what usury, you ensnared my weak father, I shall probably never know. I do not care to ask. I may be young, but I am not blind, and

one thing was clear to me from the very first day on which you entered my father's house, as some triumphant conqueror, and stooped to kiss my hand—it was clear to me from the moment when you, the grandson of a serf, first sat at my mother's table—and that is, that you have bought me with your gold, Kemény András. You paid so many bank-notes, such measures of wheat or wine in order to call me your wife, to brag of me before your companions at the inn, to boast of me to the village girls, with whom you used to flirt and dance, to see me keep your house in order, to give me your commands, to beat me, as the peasants do their wives. I—a noble girl—your wife! Well, you have bought me! you have paid for me, as you do for your cattle and your sheep upon the *puszta*. The bargain is concluded. The daughter of those who once held your kindred in bondage is your slave. Be content, Kemény András! Command her to obey, if you will, but do not ask her if she hate you!"

Gradually she had spoken more and more quickly; each word, every insult which she uttered, seemed to strike him in the face, as once her father's blow had done, which still remained unavenged. She was quite calm and self-possessed now, and, though her voice was hardly above a whisper, it was clear and without a tremor.

He had allowed her to speak without making the slightest effort to stop her. Perhaps he had not the strength to do so. His blood coursed through his veins like fire, his temples throbbed as if they would break; and yet he listened, as if longing to endure this torture to the full, as if he longed to know what an infinity of hatred there lurked in that young girl's

heart, and what amount of pain his own bruised heart could bear.

What a fool he had been to think of her as a child, coy and frightened with the newness of the life before her! What a fool to offer her silent adoration, pity, or patience. He could not see her, but he could feel her, quivering with all the pent-up passions of womanhood, with bitter hatred, and with deadly revenge. He could feel the frail arms writhing in his clutch, and, on his cheek, her breath warm and panting, hissing out words of insult and of contempt called from the bitterness of an injured woman's—not a girl's—heart. Oh! if there was so much hatred, so much passion within her, she still was a woman exquisitely beautiful, and adorable beyond all other women; if her passions were strong, he would conquer them; if she hated him now, he would turn that hatred into love. Since she had, with cold and callous words, with insult and defiance, bruised and trampled on that great love he bore her, if she would not bend to his deep affection, accept and cherish his reverence, he would break her to his will, and there would be pleasure still—pleasure born of hell, perhaps, but as great as the tortures he endured—to make her suffer as he had suffered.

Forgotten were Pater Ambrosius' teachings, his striving after higher things, the lessons of love and compassion, the refinement born of a great heart and the accomplishment of noble deeds. She had said it truly: he was a peasant, born of serfs; years of education had kept his passions in check, but they were all there, subject to the influence of this one woman, whom he had worshipped with all the strength of his self-contained nature. She had insulted him, derided

him, returning loathing for his love; that love lay maimed and bruised by her hatred and his desire.

He would have beaten her as the herdsmen out on the plains beat their wives, if they disobey, or make them jealous, for very love, because that love is uncontrolled. He could see the outline of her white shoulders in the moonlight, and all that once had been low in the peasant's nature, which the kind Pater's teachings, his own kindly heart, had held in check, rose again, masterful, passionate, to the fore.

"Ilonka," he said, while swiftly his trembling arms once more closed round her, "God knows I have worshipped you as only good Catholics worship their Lord, that I have honoured every piece of land, every blade of grass, which your foot has ever trodden. This you do not choose to believe. In exchange for all that love, which I was ready to pour forth humbly at your feet, you have given me cruelty beyond compare, insults more terrible than blows. You have, with your own hands, dispelled the fairy vision I had of a sweet and lovely girl, frail and tender, who would nestle in my arms, and allow me to keep all sorrows and ills from her path, in exchange for one sweet smile of love. The fairy vision has flitted away, but instead of this you have shown me the living reality: an exquisitely beautiful woman, full of passions, of deadly hatred, which speaks of some love which, if born, will be well worth the conquering. That reality I cannot worship; it is too far removed from the pictures of the Saints or of the Virgin, but perhaps it comes nearer to my own self, my own nature, low, sordid, vulgar—a peasant, you know, the grandson of a serf. That reality, my beautiful wife, is my own; your obedience I can compel; you are in my arms, and, though

my love is changed, it is as great, as ardent as before."

But, as he lost his self-control, so she gradually regained hers. She did not struggle. She stood up, listless and passive in his arms, only turning her head away, so that she might not see him.

"My obedience is yours. I have said it. You need have no fear. It will be as absolute as is my contempt."

"And as your love, when I have conquered it," he said proudly.

If she was afraid, she did not show it. She paused a moment before she wielded her last, her deadliest weapon.

"My love," she said slowly, "that, Kemény András, even if you were different from what you are, could never become yours, for I have given it to another."

Was it a sob? Was it a cry? So heart-rending a sound was it that the very wing seemed to pause as if to listen, in pity.

"Woman," he whispered hoarsely, "may God have mercy on your soul, for you have gone too far."

His torture had turned to madness; before his eyes the gloom had suddenly changed to a dark red mist, which was like blood. The wounded beast was at last at bay. With savage fury he threw the white figure down on the floor at his feet, while his hand found the heavy clasp-knife from his belt; and in the moonlight there glittered, cold and blue, the polished steel, which he held high over his head.

"András! in the name of the Virgin Mary! what dost thou with that knife?"

A flood of light came streaming in through the door. Etelka had heard the fearful cry, even in the kitchen, and she stood there, with a lamp in her hand, with

blanched face, gazing at the terrible scene before her.

For one moment—an eternity—there was silence. Then András slowly dropped his arm: the knife fell with a dull, metallic sound on the floor. He stood, with head bent, looking down at the figure at his feet. With superhuman effort he was endeavouring to collect his scattered senses. She had not stirred, but half lay, half knelt before him, her head erect, and her eyes, cold and blue as the metal, meeting his own in a defiant gaze.

"Ilonka," said András at last very slowly, his voice shaken and hoarse, "for the last hour my reason has been flying from me, bit by bit: the last shred flew away just now. The darkness, the moonlight—I know not—helped to scatter it away. But my mother's voice has suddenly brought it back, and I stand here shamed before you—worse still, shamed before myself. Put down the lamp, mother dear," he said, turning to Etelka, "and help this lady to a chair. She is ill and I have frightened her. But when she is alone with you she will recover. I, myself, have much business to see to in Zárda, and Csillag is ready to carry me there to-night. I do not know when I shall return, but in the meanwhile this lady will stay with you as your guest, until she wishes to return to her home. I know you have prepared a good supper, and I hope you will eat it in peace, for you know Csillag is sure-footed, and I shall be in Zárda before the night birds begin to croak."

He picked up his heavy mantle which was lying on the floor, and fastened it round his shoulders. Ilonka had sunk into a chair, and her eyes followed the tall, picturesque figure of her husband, as with absolute calm he stood a moment to give his mother several

directions as to the work to-morrow in the fields. Then he came close to where she sat.

"Before my mother, I would like to say to you, Ilonka, that whenever you wish it you are free to return to your parents, who have so well taught you the lessons of truth, of honour, and obedience. And, as from my childhood she has known all my thoughts, heard my every prayer, it is my desire that she should hear this my oath. As I swore this morning before the altar, so do I swear now, by a most solemn oath, both as a Christian, upon the crucifix, and as a man, upon that which I held dearer, more sacred than all, my love for a girlish vision, young and pure as the angels, vanished from me for ever. Upon the memory of that dead love I swear to you, that never while you live will I offend your ears by speaking to you of that love; never will I, by word or deed, remind you that the low-born son of serfs is your lord and husband. You may command the shelter of my roof or seek again that of your parents, as you will. You are as free as you were before the presumptuous peasant dared to ask that you should place your hand in his."

Before the last echo of his quivering voice had died away, before Ilonka had found the strength to look up at the tall figure, so noble, so dignified in its pathos, he had gone, and the hoofs of Csillag were heard galloping away towards the *puszta*.

Then Ilonka buried her head in her hands, and sobbed as if her heart would break.



PART III

CHAPTER XXVIII

LOVE LIES BLEEDING

"LET me lead Dándar part of the way for you, Pater, and perhaps you will not mind walking as far as the crossroad with me?"

"Mind? I shall enjoy it, my son. I have never seen a brighter morning. And . . . but for Dándar, you know . . . I should have had to walk all the way to Árokszállás."

"It was very foolish of you, Pater, not to have told me three months ago that Kópé was dead. You could have had Dándar at once, and then perhaps you would not have been all this while without coming to see me."

András had slipped the horse's bridle over his arm, and the two men, leaving the little thatched cottage behind, began to walk down the main-road.

It was one of those bright, cold, frosty mornings in December, when a brilliant sun shines down merrily on the crisp sheet of snow which lies evenly over the vast plain. Hardly an eminence or a stump to break the monotony of this shroud, that glistens in the wintry sun like myriads of tiny diamonds. The village of Zárda (hardly a village, since it had no church), with its few straggling cottages which looked as if thatched with snow, seemed lonely and desolate. There is nothing to be done in the fields, and the Hungarian peasant in the winter likes to wrap himself up in his

mantle and stare dreamily into the fire of his great oven, smoking pipe after pipe, in silence and drowsiness. András and the Pater were soon in the open road. The old priest's nose was quite red with the nipping frost, though he was wrapped up to the ears in a huge great-coat of black sheepskin, from beneath which emerged his thin legs encased in great leather top-boots to protect them from the snow. András walked on silently by his side for a while. He seemed not to feel the intense cold, for his great mantle hung down his back, and his arms came out bare from his full, thin lawn sleeves.

The terrible tragedy which he had gone through had left very little mark upon him outwardly; his tall figure was just as upright, his step as firm, his head as erect. Only the face seemed to have grown older. The mouth drooped more, there were two deep lines between the brows, and as the sun shone brilliantly on the dark hair, there were some very obvious streaks of grey among the black.

"I daresay you have found this small cottage at Zárda very lonely at times, my son," said the Pater tentatively.

"Yes," replied András somewhat wistfully, "I think I have had about enough of it. . . . I miss my mother, you see . . . she and I were always together on winter evenings. . . . Yes! . . . I shall be glad to get home!"

"That's right, my son; you have done my old heart good by that speech. . . . Heigho! I shall have a merry ride home, thinking of the joyful news I am taking to Ételka, . . . and our boys and girls, too, at Árokaszállás. They will give you such a welcome!"

András shook his head with a smile.

"No, Father, they will not do that. You know better than to mean what you say. They have too much respect for me, now, to give me a real hearty welcome."

"András, that was an unkind speech. Your name in Árokszállás has become dear to every household. They would be very devils indeed of ingratitude, if they forgot all that you have done for them, during the terrible epidemic."

"Thank God, that is well over now," said András, ignoring the first part of the priest's speech, "all round here, at least, we have not had a single case for six weeks."

"Of course we never suffered quite as badly over at Árokszállás as you did here in Zárda. Actually the last fatal case we had was old Rosenstein—the Jew. He was very distressed, poor fellow, that he did not see you before he died. I was with him to the last, and it was quite painful to see the intense straining expression in his face, listening for some sound that would not come."

"It was a great disappointment to me, too, Pater, for now we shall never know what it was that lay so heavily on the poor man's conscience. It surely could not have been his numerous deeds of usury on our poor peasant lads, for I do believe the Jews, in the lowlands at least, do not regard the demanding of exorbitant interest as a sin."

"No, I am sure it was not that," said Pater Ambrosius musingly; "it was your name that was constantly on his lips, and as he lay dying, he pressed my hand in entreaty, and murmured, 'Do you think he will forgive?' Ah! my son, it is sad indeed for those who, not being Catholics, have not the supreme consolation of the Holy Sacrament of Confession,

which brings the only true comfort to the departing soul."

"Beyond that he told me many a lie in his lifetime, I am not aware that I had anything to forgive the man."

"When he ultimately pressed the paper into my hand which proved to be his will and testament, he still repeated, 'This will atone. . . . This will atone. . . . It is his!'"

"After all," added András, "the funny old scarecrow had no one to whom he could leave his shekels; that is perhaps the only reason why he made me the heir to his hoarded-up wealth. God knows I did not want it. I am very sorry indeed I did not see Rosenstein at the last, if my shaking his hand could have eased his mind of its imaginary burden. I arrived just half an hour after his eyes were closed. The roads were in a shocking condition; even Csillag could not get through in time; and, you know, there was a great deal to do over here."

"Yes, I know! there is not one mouth this side of the Tarna that does not speak in gratitude of your unswerving kindness and devotion. At Árokszállás, the two doctors you got down from Budapesth did absolute wonders; and Etelka was a perfect angel to the women. . . . She . . . and another. . . ."

The Pater paused half shyly. András was gazing out before him across the desolate, snow-covered landscape.

"She is a good woman, András," added the Pater, at first with timidity, then gradually more emphatically; "she may have her faults, her pride may amount to a sin, but she is an angel of pity to those who are sick and in trouble."

"Tell me more about the village folk," interrupted

András quietly ; " remember, I have seen and heard nothing of them since the day on which I arrived too late to see poor old Rosenstein."

" Well ! " said the Pater, with a disappointed sigh, " after that day the cholera certainly seemed to have spent itself, and God at last had mercy upon us. But the little churchyard is very full, András, and . . . on Sundays I see many vacant places in the church."

" The young ones will soon grow up, Pater," said András, with some of his wonted cheeriness. " Why, Sándor the smith's boys must be growing lads, and Fényes Margit had twins this summer ; all those mites whom last I saw in swaddling clothes must be beginning to toddle. Why ! I have a veritable army of god-children in the villages this side of the Tarna."

" Yes, there are a good many wise mothers, András, in those villages " said the Pater, with a smile ; " it is no wonder that Árokszállás is getting jealous of Zárda."

" They need not be," said András, while a deep shadow seemed to fall over his face ; " it has not been an abode of joy."

" It has been the home of truly Christian devotion and generosity, my son, all the greater since no one seems to know yet its full extent. But the epidemic is over ; you have provided for every misery till God once more brings merry harvesting round ; you need a rest, my son, and will be happier at home."

" Happier ? "

Evidently the word was involuntary and had escaped him unawares, for he closed his lips tightly, as if to check any further sounds, while the lines on his face became harder, more accentuated. The priest was wanting to say something more. He looked up

once or twice at his young friend, took out his snuff-box, and toyed with it nervously. There had been such intense hopelessness, such a depth of sorrow in that one bitter word, that his kindly nature shrank from further touching a wound which was still so sore and bleeding.

"Your mother must have missed you a great deal, András," he said at last.

"Yes . . . I know . . ." replied the peasant, "we are apt to be selfish in our griefs. The house was distasteful to me. . . . Without thinking of the dear soul, I fled from it. Then, when the distress and cholera became so terrible here, I was forced to stay, for they wanted me. . . . I think it was selfish . . . for she must have been very lonely. . . . But I am going back soon. . . . Perhaps to-morrow."

"Ételka has, of course, spent many lonely days, András, . . . but during the terrible time of the cholera she was not absolutely alone. . . ."

Timidly the priest looked up at the young face, on which sorrow had written such deep lines. Pater Ambrosius knew next to nothing of the terrible tragedy that had caused the bridegroom of one day to flee from his home, which had brought those streaks of grey in the dark hair, and had given to the kindly eyes that look of hopeless misery.

"*She* was with your mother, András, so that Ételka might not be lonely."

"I know, Pater; God will no doubt reward her for that."

"She has been the good angel of the village, András. Next to you, there is no one who did more to comfort and cheer the sick, to help the orphan, and console the widow."

"Yes, Father," repeated András, "there is a heavenly reward for all that charity."

"All the people bless her, and pray for her."

"We all have need of prayer, you see, Pater."

"They all pray . . . for her happiness."

"God, I think, will soon grant it," said András quietly.

Pater Ambrosius looked scrutinisingly at him. He did not quite understand what András meant, but it suddenly struck him how very deeply the lines of suffering were graven on the young face, and he wondered how long it would be before that iron constitution succumbed altogether beneath this weight of overwhelming sorrow.

It was uphill work to pursue the subject. The old priest, who possessed his young friend's confidence, did not care to seem to pry into the one secret the proud peasant had thought fit to keep from him.

The village gossip, fortunately, had not reached András' ears. He must have guessed, of course, that they gossiped. He knew life in his own village far too well to suppose that they would keep respectful silence over the extraordinary events of that great day in May. But András had never troubled himself about the gossip, and then, after a while, the dreaded cholera came, with grim hand, stopping the mouths of all to every talk save that of anguish.

Silently the two men walked on side by side, crunching the crisp snow beneath their feet. They had left the straggling village of Zárda behind; only a few lonely cottages now broke the monotony of the low-lying land before them. All was desolate and still; the snow lying like a glistening pall over the few trees, the thatched roofs of the huts, and the short

stubble of the maize fields. Overhead a flight of ravens sent a melancholy croaking through the air, and far, beyond, the tiny steeple of the village church threw the only note of colour—a brilliant red—upon the dull canvas, whilst to the left, through the stripped branches of the acacia trees, there glimmered the yellow and the green of the walls of Bideskút.

"András," said Pater Ambrosius, suddenly changing the subject of talk, "there is something else which lies very near to my heart, and which, coward as I am, I hardly like to speak to you about . . ."

"I did not know, Father, that I was so formidable as all that; I seem to have made a lovely muddle of my life," added András bitterly, "since even you have ceased to look upon me as a friend."

"God forbid, András, that you should so misunderstand my meaning. It was stupid of me to talk as I did, and I am, moreover, an ungrateful wretch not to have told you at once what it is that lies so near my heart."

"It is not too late, Pater; we are far from the cross-roads yet."

"It is about the school, András."

The peasant frowned.

"I know that you do not altogether approve of the idea," continued the Pater hurriedly, "but God has entrusted me with a sacred mission on this earth, and I must not be coward enough to shirk it. You and I have often discussed the grand idea of a school for our little ones in the village. You were as enthusiastic about it as I was; you have, I know, happy recollections of the three years you spent under my teaching, and you told me more than once that the happiest day of your life would be when every soul in the county

of Heves knew how to read and write ; and now . . . ”

“ Now I have changed,” said András, with a certain amount of roughness, “and whenever you have broached the subject before me, I have refused to discuss it with you. Yes ! I have changed a great deal since the days when, after the terrible fire of Bideskút, you first propounded your great scheme to me, and did me the infinite honour to ask me to help you in carrying it through. Since then, Father, I have had such bitter, such terrible longing after a state of brutish ignorance, with no aspirations save after daily bread, no ideals save those of plenty of wine, good *czigány* music, and buxom village maids, a longing after the happiness born of content with these aspirations and ideals, the happiness of the beasts upon the fields, and I have no longer had a craving to snatch that same happiness from my fellow-men in the villages of the lowlands. There is so little they would receive in compensation.”

“ András,” said the priest very gently, “you have suffered a great deal, and, like all those who have a terrible malady, you look about you blindly for its cause, so blindly that, as one who plays at blind man’s buff, you go tumbling very far short of the mark. Education gave you high aspirations ; on their wings you went wandering into the kingdom of ideals, and suddenly, when you thought to grasp them—your hand had, as it were, almost touched them—something snapped, and you were precipitated back to earth, very sore and bruised. You blame the aspirations that bore you upward, the ideals which you tried to grasp, and do not see that perhaps, after all, they were overweighted with a burden of human passions that dragged them back to earth.”

"Nay, Father, I have not ventured to blame my ideals. Perhaps, as you say, they were just beyond my reach. When I was a young boy, they consisted of seeing the ears of corn on my father's fields fuller and more golden than those of any other man; later on, I dreamed of a quiet homestead, with my mother sitting placidly in her big armchair, while I gave her every comfort she could want, and perhaps, in my old age—when she was gone—with a good-looking wife, whose baking and weaving should be famed throughout the land; of those ideals, Father, most of our village lads have dreamed. They are dreams such as are fitting for the descendants of serfs. Ideals such as those are not difficult to attain, and even if the peasant mind soars too far towards these regions, humble though they be, well! the altitude has not been a high one. The fall is gentle and leaves but easily healed wounds in its trace. Contentment, a certain quiet philosophy, helps to make old age pleasant. But I, with the arrogance born of newly-found riches, began to dream of other things. Tentatively, I stretched out my coarse, brown hands after other things than spade or scythe. You led my tottering footsteps into a new region of learning and culture. A delightful feeling of well-being crept over me. I began to think that this entrancing realm was really my home, that I had for ever left behind the sordid ignorance of the peasant, his gross pleasures, his vulgar, common nature, and that henceforth I could wander on, at will, for ever unmolested, higher and higher, through many mansions, to a region of entrancing ideals, which my delighted vision suddenly saw beyond the cloudland in which I dwelt. Then, astride on my dreams, I set forth to seek that ideal among the stars. I had reached

it, the clouds had parted, and I saw such a vision of paradise as has been given to no mortal man to see. But, as I stretched forth my hand to grasp it, suddenly there rose before me the grim and inexorable fury 'Prejudice,' guarding the entrance to my paradise. With scornful finger, the monster pointed at my rough hands, my heavy gait, my sheepskin mantle, my linen shirt; then, with loud, mocking laughter, plucked at my heart-strings, and, wrenching them out of my breast, hurled me back from the giddy heights down to earth and hell. Ah, Father, it was a terrible fall! You see I had dared to gaze at the stars! Nay! I do not blame them. They cannot help their own unattainable loveliness, and the fury that guards them has placed a solid bandage over their eyes. It *is* my own folly which I blame, my own arrogance, my passions, if you will; but also I blame the invisible Hand that first pulled away from before me the blissful veil of ignorance, and showed me glimpses of that paradise, which must for ever, to one of my caste, remain unattainable. You see, Father, I fell from a fearful altitude. I am bruised and wounded unto death; but in the midst of my weakness I still have strength enough to whisper: 'Strive not, ye fools! in ignorant content lies the only true happiness.' "

His voice had broken down in a sob. The priest did not reply. His experience of human nature, such as he had usually found it, in the simple folk who came to tell him their sorrows and their wrongs, was at a loss how to deal with the complexities of this strange and passionate creature who had all the sensitiveness of the cultured man coupled with the unreasoning headstrongness of the rough Magyar peasant. His kindly nature felt deeply for this great sorrow, at

which he only guessed vaguely, but which he could not understand, and his hand stole timidly up, as if consolingly, to András's shoulder.

They had reached the crossroads, and the young peasant had stopped before saying "Good-bye." He had spoken with a good deal of vehemence, and his face looked paler and more careworn than ever. He pulled himself together, however, on feeling the kindly pressure on his shoulder. Gently he took the old priest's hand in both his own and pressed it warmly.

Pater Ambrosius looked long and sympathetically into the dark eyes that had such sombre, hopeless yearning in them.

"Don't you think, András," he said very kindly, "that it would do you good if you were to tell me your trouble?"

Quickly András's grasp relaxed; he dropped his old friend's hand, and the frown appeared, deep and dark, upon his forehead.

"I have none to tell," he said indifferently.

Pater Ambrosius sighed. He looked disappointed and hurt, and busied himself with his horse, preparing to mount.

"Won't you say good-bye, Pater?" asked András.

The priest took the hand which the young peasant held out to him, but looked reproachfully at him the while.

"András, you have ceased to care for your old friend."

"That was a wicked speech, Pater," said András earnestly, "you will have to write to the Bishop for special absolution for so monstrous a falsehood. . . . There! there! . . . you must forgive me . . . I am an ungrateful wretch . . . and . . . Pater . . . you

shall have what money you want for the schools . . .
Let them start building the moment the frost breaks up.
. . . You settle it all . . . it is your idea . . . you
carry it out as you think best. . . . Good-bye! Tell
my mother I will be back to-morrow."

"God bless you, András! I——"

"Hush! I think perhaps He may do that later on.
. . . At present He is not thinking of me! . . .
Good-bye!"

The old priest had hoisted himself up on his horse.
He seemed loth to go. Once or twice he looked back
as Dándar started off at a slow majestic trot. The tall
figure of the peasant stood for a long time looking
after him at the crossroads; Pater Ambrosius could see
him well, outlined against the brilliant sky. The kind
priest fumbled for his large handkerchief and blew his
nose very violently. He had felt an uncomfortable
lump in his throat.

CHAPTER XXIX

HONOUR THY FATHER AND THY MOTHER

ONCE more the walls of Bideskút rang out with excitement and laughter. Once more the great kitchens were filled with busy maids and scullions; oxen were roasted whole on gigantic spits; sheep and lambs were slaughtered; there was rushing hither and thither up and down the great staircase and along the stone-paved walls. It was the Countess's birthday to-morrow, and at last, after two years, Bideskút would see gaiety, hear czigány music once more.

The Countess Irma felt more agitated and nervous than she would, in the ordinary course of events, have thought it good form to be. So many terrible things had happened since the last time, when a bevy of guests had filled Bideskút with that atmosphere of aristocratic gaiety which she loved so well; she knew that the time had at last come when she would have to face the covert sneers and satirical sympathy, the astonished questions of her friends over the preposterous marriage of the loveliest heiress in the county. As she gave her orders in the kitchen and stables, saw to the decoration of the tables, the tapping of the wine casks, the airing of the guest chambers, she hardly realised that there had been any great change in her life since when, two years ago, after that terrible and mysterious fire, the guests all left hurriedly, leaving sorrow and

Honour thy Father and Mother 313

desolation behind. Only when she met Ilonka on the stairs, and when during meal-time was aggravated by the strange silent ways of the merry girl of two years ago, and felt the unaccountable sensation of not being able to order her own daughter about, or find fault with her curious, independent ways, then only did she unpleasantly remember the many events that had been crowded in upon her thick and fast in the past two years.

That Ilonka would very soon leave her vulgar husband's home had always been a part of her scheme, without which, perhaps, she never would have given her consent to the terrible marriage; but she had always, at the same time, reckoned that her child would come back to her very much as she had been before the awful peasant suitor had o'ershadowed her life; that, in fact, Ilonka, as a grass widow, would be perhaps a little more fascinating to the men, a little more free and loud in her manner, but in other ways would be very much the same, and that she would join in merrily with her mother in a mutual effort to drive all ideas of the peasant husband well out of the precincts of Bideskút.

When, the day after the wedding, Ilonka returned to her former home, the very shadow of her original self, the mother's heart felt at first a pang of remorse and sorrow. Full of genuine sympathy, she tried to fold the poor ill-used child on her fond motherly breast, and prepared to hear with horror and with tears the confidences of the deeply-wounded, aristocratic girl, thrown into the arms of the common brute who was her husband.

Instead of this, her daughter, evidently weak and ill from all she had gone through, refused to speak a

word to her mother on the subject of her brief stay beneath her husband's roof. Silently she had allowed both father and mother to kiss her ; silently she had resumed her accustomed place at meals, and silently taken possession, after one night's absence, of her girl's room, and continued her scarcely interrupted ways.

Ilonka was strangely changed, her mother thought. She seemed to have forgotten how to smile, spoke very little, and brought strange, curious notions back with her from her short stay in the peasant's cottage. Her mother had no authority over her. Countess Irma felt, herself, how ridiculous it would be to attempt to dictate to a daughter who, after all, was a married woman and had the right to do as she pleased. Certainly it was very irritating that Ilonka insisted on going so often to see the old peasant woman at Kisfalú whom she persisted in calling "mother." A strange friendship appeared to have sprung up between the young grass widow and her mother-in-law. The Countess Irma could not understand it ; but she had it, on the most reliable authority, that Kemény András had lived alone at Zárda ever since his wedding-day ; she was therefore, to a certain extent, satisfied that her daughter did not so far demean herself as to keep up any relationship with the presumptuous peasant who had dared to call himself her husband.

As for that odious Kemény András, the Countess did not trouble her head much about him. The day after his marriage he had sent over to Bideskút a ponderous paper, which turned out to be a deed of gift to Ilonka of the whole of the Bideskút property. That was as it should be ; of course, he could not expect his aristocratic wife to be dependent on him or on her parents. Countess Irma thought it all for the best. The

child had never known that Bideskút had passed out of her parents' hands. She need never know it now. She never asked questions; seemed altogether not to trouble herself as to whence her maintenance came, or who was responsible for her food and clothing. She supposed her father to be still the wealthy nobleman she had always heard him described, who was well able to look after his only daughter, if she did not choose to live with her husband; her parents treated her most generously. She had everything she wanted; even during that terrible cholera time, Bideskúty gave her all the money, the wheat, the wine she asked for, for the poor in the village. The Countess Irma put up her hands in holy horror when Ilonka announced her intention of staying at Kisfalu until the epidemic was over. Ilonka had said "I am going," in a tone that brooked of no gainsaying. Moreover, what could prevent her? She was a married woman. She was no longer under her mother's tutelage.

She stayed away for four months; Countess Irma could not imagine what the child could be about. Kemény András was at Zárda, where the cholera was at its worst; the noble lady at Bideskút fondly hoped that the epidemic would do its full duty, as far as the odious man was concerned.

The cholera in the village and consequent fear of infection was sufficient excuse for ceasing to see Pater Ambrosius. The priest had developed a most unpleasant habit of talking for ever of András, and all the money which he spent in order to alleviate the horrors of the epidemic. Ilonka was away, so she did not hear this perpetual chorus of praise, but she seemed to have caught some of her vulgar husband's fondness for the wretched peasants in the dirty hovels of Árokszállás.

At last, in the winter, Ilonka came home again. She seemed brighter and pleasanter than when she left, though she never would tell her mother how she had spent the last few months. The Countess Irma began to look forward to the spring and summer. Last year she had had no guests at the house at all for her birthday. The cholera was just at its worst in the county. But this year she knew many would come, and half-forgotten traditions would be revived. Curiosity would bring many guests to Bideskút. Countess Kantássy would be tiresome. Mariska had just married Bartócz Zsiga, who had a brilliant appointment at the embassy in London, while Bideskúty Ilonka, the far-famed beauty of the county, had married one of her father's peasantry. However, that annoyance would have to be got over. The hospitality of Bideskút this year, the wines, the meat, the fruit, would surpass anything the neighbours could ever do.

There always was plenty of money now, and this year the harvest had been splendid, and had well compensated for the terrible floods last year.

Kemény András certainly seemed to understand the management of the estate. This was only natural. All peasants understood the growing of wheat and turnips. He managed everything; Gyuri merely enjoyed the produce and the revenues, and of that there was now "plenty and to spare."

"It seems quite like old times," said the Countess Irma to her husband, who sat smoking in his study. "Do you remember, Gyuri, two years ago you and I sat just like this, discussing the arrangements for my birthday party? Who would have guessed all the events that have crowded in upon us since that day?"

Bideskúty Gyuri was suffering from the gout; he

Honour thy Father and Mother 317

could not put his foot to the ground, which made him cross and irritable. He grunted savagely, as he smoked his pipe.

"I daresay, now, you see how right I was," added the Countess, "to warn you against those inventions of Satan. Everybody warned you, Gyuri. You must see how wrong you were."

Bideskúty said nothing. He was armed with infinite patience. Moreover, he had heard reproaches and recriminations so often that they had no longer any effect upon his temper. He drew great clouds of smoke out of his long pipe, giving occasional grunts of pain, and adding two or three strong words under his breath. When his wife was silent he said quietly :

"I am sure all your *menus* are not settled yet. And you said half an hour ago that you were going to cut the verbenas for your table decorations."

"That means that you want me to go. Do you expect any one?"

"Yes, I do."

"Who is it?"

"Some one on business."

"Business, Gyuri?" she asked suspiciously. "Not some Jew money-lender, surely?"

"No! No! What in Heaven's name has it got to do with you whom I am going to see?"

"I do not understand the word 'business.' That son-in-law of yours sees to all the business, usually. You say it is not a Jew money-lender—surely it is not . . . ?"

"Well, yes, it is. I have a right to see whom I please in my own house, I presume?"

"You do not mean to say that man is coming here?"

"And why not?"

"With Ilonka in the house?"

"Well! he is not going to eat her, I suppose?"

"Gyuri, you must think of her feelings. She cannot meet that man here."

"Stuff and nonsense! He is her husband, is he not? You are not going to imagine that they will for ever live apart, like this? And if they do, all I can say is that Ilonka must have aggravated him beyond measure, just as you aggravate me. He had no gout, so he ran away."

"Gyuri, I do believe that vulgar peasant has bewitched you, as he has bewitched that stupid old priest. Talk about aggravation! I endure a perfect martyrdom from hearing his praises sung by all. A horrid brute I call him, after the way in which he has behaved to your daughter. She is far too kind and too considerate to tell you all she has endured at his hands; but she would not have left him so soon unless he had been a more vulgar beast than even I took him for."

"You women have no sense of honour!" thundered Bideskúty; "you talk of that man as a brute and a beast, and you are content to take every generous gift from his hands. He rescued this very house we live in from the clutches of that blood-sucking Rosenstein; he handed over to Ilonka the entire property, which, from beginning to end, must have cost him hundreds of thousands. Quietly he manages everything for us, in order that she may live in luxury, and that neither her pride nor ours should suffer. And you talk of his shameful conduct to our daughter? What do you say to her conduct then?"

"Gyuri, remember that the poor child does not know that Bideskút ever passed out of your hands. She knows nothing of any money transactions that passed between you and that man."

Honour thy Father and Mother 319

"Well, it was not my fault that these abominable secrets were concocted. Ilonka was old enough to be told all. The man did not stand a fair chance. You did your best to place him in an odious light before the child's eyes, and then threw her in his arms, leaving him to fight his own battles. It was not fair."

"Gyuri, you are taking leave of your senses! To tell Ilonka what passed between Kemény András and yourself would have shown you in a very humiliating light before your own child. How could you have expected her, after that, to honour her father and her mother? You would have destroyed all the respect she ever had for us."

"I do not know that it would not have been better, Irma, that she respected us a little less, and her husband a little more. I tell you I positively groan under the load of gratitude she and all of us owe to that man."

"Gyuri, these are more of those progressive notions which you get out of the foreign books you read, notions which have already caused your ruin."

"Do not harp on that string, Irma, or——"

"Hush! it is no use losing your temper, Gyuri; what is done cannot be undone. We must try to make her as happy as we can, and get her to forget the past. She is very young; he is close on middle age, I believe. There is every chance that she will be a widow, perhaps, before she is thirty. Then she will be very rich; she can make what marriage she pleases, and she will be the first one to be thankful to us for the way we arranged her life for her. In the meanwhile I must try to keep her out of this part of the house. To-day I——"

The door had been gently opened, and Ilonka came

in with a pretty smile, which gave her a look of her former self. Her mother darted a suspicious look at her, but the girl appeared unconcerned, and merrier than she had seemed for many months.

"Well, I must go and see to my flower decorations," said the Countess with indifference. "Ilonka, I think you can help me. You might get me a large basketful of those pretty verbenas from the back of the greenhouse. I do not want the maids to cut them, as they pull the plants up by their roots. I can do with quite a great many. Panna will give you a basket; when you have filled it, you might join me in the bakehouse, where I shall be arranging them."

"I will follow you at once, mama. But," she added with a coquettish little smile, "may I not stay and talk to papa for a little while?"

"Only a few moments then; I am waiting for the verbenas, and your papa is expecting one of his bailiffs on business."

"Five minutes, mama, and I am with you."

The Countess Irma was reluctant to go. She never liked to leave her husband alone with Ilonka. However, she threw a warning look at Bideskúty, and went out.

Ilonka waited till her mother's footsteps were heard no longer down the passage; then she turned to her father, and said quietly:

"Papa, will you tell me what is the 'load of gratitude' I and all of us owe to my husband?"

"Ilonka, you have been listening!"

"Without meaning to, I assure you. I was coming into the room; that phrase caught my ear, as I was about to open the door. I confess I tried to hear more, but could not catch what mama said. You will tell me, won't you?"

Honour thy Father and Mother 321

"I . . . I . . . only spoke in a general way," said Bideskúty nervously. "You cannot have heard properly."

"Now, papa," she said coaxingly, "I want you to try and remember, please, that I am no longer quite such a child as I was. Two years are a long time," she added wistfully, "and I have had a great deal to go through, since then. I . . . am married . . . and a great deal older . . . I think I have a right to know in what way we owe a debt of gratitude to the man whose name I bear."

"You must get your mother to tell you all you want to know, Ilonka," said Bideskúty.

"You know quite well, papa, that she will tell me nothing. It is no use fighting against it, dear; I shall not go out of this room until I have been told what I want to know."

"There is nothing to tell."

"What debt of gratitude do I owe my husband?"

"You misunderstood me," persisted Bideskúty, obstinately.

"Papa, I have asked you, with a child's respect. Do not force me to demand what I have the right to know."

"Ilonka, you are perverse. What good can you get out of knowing things which only concern your mother and myself?"

"What money did Kemény András give you for allowing me to marry him?"

"Ilonka, you have taken leave of your senses," said Bideskúty, furiously.

"No! I have not. You will not tell me the truth, and I jump at conclusions. If you refuse to tell me everything, it will be impossible for me to remain

under your roof another hour, and . . . " she added, with a catch in her throat, "as, of course, my husband would not have me, I shall have to go away . . . elsewhere."

"Ilonka, listen! You women are most unreasonable. You say you are not a child. You must know that a fire one year and a flood the next are enough to ruin any proprietor. Coupled with that, a blood-sucking usurer cheated and swindled me, till all my land passed into alien hands. Your husband had lent me a great deal of money on the security of my lands. He charged me a fair interest. That brute Rosenstein, whom, I hear, the devil has at last fetched away, made me sign a paper agreeing to pay usurious interest. I paid it year after year, not knowing that it went into the Jew's pockets, and that Kemény never saw a penny of it. The fire and the flood completed the usurer's work. I was a ruined man. Then, there were some papers which I had signed without reading them—acknowledgments of money which I had never received—that brute Rosenstein threatened me with the Lord knows what. It appears that he had right on his side, since I had signed those accursed papers. Kemény András came to me. He stopped the Jew's mouth with gold, bought back all those papers for me, paid the mortgage on this house, from which Rosenstein was threatening to turn us all out. The land was his anyway. You, I, your mother, were beggars, like the gipsies without a home. He told me he loved you. He wanted to marry you. The land, he said, would thus be secured to you and your children. What could I do? . . . The knife was at my throat. . . . I consented."

Ilonka did not speak. She was very pale and her

Honour thy Father and Mother 323

eyes were fixed, staring at her father in hopeless bewilderment.

"He paid the mortgage on this house. He took over the property and managed it, as only he knows how to manage an estate. It all was his, but no one ever knew it. He consulted me in everything, and acted as if he were merely my bailiff. At times I quite forget that I am not really the owner of the land, and give him my orders, which he always carries out. He once told me that he was only your administrator. . . . He has more heart, that man," added Bideskúty, bringing his fist heavily down on the table, "than any one I have ever known ; he——"

"Please, papa," interrupted Ilonka, "tell me only the facts. Do not overwhelm me with shame more than you need."

"You never told your mother why you left your husband. He has told me nothing. The day after your marriage he sent me a paper. I read it through very carefully. It is a document by which he makes over to you the property of Bideskút, absolutely, reserving himself the right to look after the management of the estate. He did not quite trust me, you see," added Bideskúty with a smile ; "he does not consider me a good manager. But he is a splendid one himself, Ilonka," he exclaimed enthusiastically ; "you see yourself in what princely style this house is being kept up, and there is always plenty of money, in good hard cash, besides ; plenty of corn to sell, and the beasts fatten and prosper like anything: I never had so many colts and calves to sell, such quantities of corn and maize. That man knows the value of every foot of land. He looks after everything. And I sit at home, approve of all he does, pocket the money when he has

done a good sale for me . . . that is to say, for you, Ilonka, for it is all yours. . . . And you have never wanted anything, have you, that you did not get?"

"Then, the money which I had to give to the poor, at cholera time, came not from you, but from him?" asked Ilonka quietly.

"No! . . . not exactly from him, my child; the property is yours."

"He gave it to me."

"Well, is he not your husband?"

"Yes!" said Ilonka vehemently, while her voice shook with tears. "Yes, he is my husband. He paid dearly enough for the pleasure of calling the penniless daughter of the lord of Bideskút his wife. Oh, the shame of the whole thing!" she added passionately; "how could you? how could you?"

"I don't know why you talk of shame—except that you and he seemed to have had a disagreement, and there is no shame in that. Your mother and I have had plenty in our day, though she was never headstrong enough to run away from me; and a disagreement is soon put right."

"Soon put right? Oh, papa! you don't know! you don't know!"

There were great sobs in her throat now; she buried her face in her hands, while she repeated:

"Oh! the shame of it! The shame! How could you?"

"I do not see that there is an occasion for making a scene," said Bideskúty a little irritably. "I don't know what is the matter with you women; you always contrive to be aggravating, whatever you do. You wanted to know; you forced me to tell you, much against my will, things which your mother had decided

Honour thy Father and Mother 325

were far better for you not to know. I must say, I see no occasion for tears."

"No, papa," said Ilonka, hastily mopping her eyes, and coming close up to her father, "as you say . . . I wanted to know . . . and you have told me. . . . I am very . . . very grateful to you for this."

"You won't tell your mother?" he suggested anxiously.

"No," she said, smiling through her tears, at his nervous expression of face, "I will not speak on the subject before her. There is no reason to do that. I will join her now . . . and cut the verbenas."

She stooped down to kiss her father.

"And, Ilonka . . . I think you might try to settle up your differences with your husband. He is such a good fellow. Your mother says it is no concern of mine, but . . . András . . . is coming here, presently . . . and——"

"I must join my mother," interrupted Ilonka quietly; "she must be waiting for the verbenas."

And before Bideskúty could say another word, she had slipped quickly out of the room.

Good old Gyuri did not understand his daughter. It seemed to him as if a great deal of fuss was made about nothing. The peasant had turned out to be a very decent sort of fellow, and Bideskúty had a certain uncomfortable feeling that András had not been granted fair play; moreover, it was very annoying that there were no prospects of those grandchildren for the sake of whom the preposterous marriage was to a certain extent bearable. He still had notions of winning András over to his own idea of his machinery and steam-mill. The latter stood desolate and solitary: innumerable spiders had woven their webs among

the massive wheels and pulleys which had well-nigh caused the ruin of a Hungarian nobleman. The obstinate peasant would hear nothing of it, and Bideskúty had not the courage to start it again on its career without the approval and influence of his wealthy son-in-law. He was glad that he had unburdened his heart to his daughter about those money affairs. He hated everything to do with money, and he had a vague feeling that there was something low and shabby being done by himself to somebody. He would not acknowledge to himself that he had a strong liking for "that confounded peasant," who was such a splendid manager; that he loved riding over his fields with him, and had the true Hungarian's admiration for so perfect a rider as Kemény undoubtedly was. Moreover, András always had pleasant news to tell him, about some lucky stroke of business; and now, when the lord of Bideskút met any of his peasantry, he was always greeted with quite a merry cheer, especially when he had his son-in-law with him. As for his threshing machines, there was no doubt that they had been quite popular during this last harvest time.

Ah, well! the world was getting topsy-turvy! Thank goodness! Bideskúty was getting old, and would not see the day when peasants would own every bit of land, and nobles would live in small houses in the provincial towns. For the present, his son-in-law always called him "my lord"; but he called András "my son," and was always glad when he had the prospect of seeing him during the day.

Even now, his face quite beamed as he heard a heavy step on the flagstones of the hall; he tried to raise himself in his chair, but his foot was very painful. The door was thrown open; the well-known tall figure

Honour thy Father and Mother 327

appeared in the oak framework; but Bideskúty, unobservant as he was, could not help noticing how ghastly white and strange was the peasant's face, how wild the look in his eyes, and, shaking his head, he held up a warning finger.

"God has brought you, my son," he said cheerily, "but where in the world do you come from? and what wine have you got into your head? You look as if, at last, you had come face to face with Satan!"

CHAPTER XXX

THE GRAVE OF LOVE

ILONKA came away from the interview with her father in a state which was half one of bewilderment, and half one of acute suffering.

That pride which is the inalienable characteristic—virtue or vice—of those Magyars who have held the lands of Hungary in uninterrupted succession of generations, while the empires of Europe fell and rose again, that pride that rules their every action, which has prevented their accepting modern progress, and built a barrier round them which nineteenth-century civilisation could never pierce, that pride in Ilonka had received a deadly wound. The descendant of a line of noble warriors who helped to build up a kingdom had been shamed by the chivalry and generosity of a peasant.

For the first time in her life, Ilonka broke the spirit of the commandment which bade her honour her father and her mother. She resented bitterly the part she had, in her ignorance, been made to play. She felt her conduct to have been odious beyond what words could say. In ignorance of the real state of the case, she had been thrown into the arms of one of those men whom, all her life, she had been taught to despise ; and, wilfully, she had been kept in ignorance of the fact that this man, among all men, was noble and generous and proud above all.

Yes, proud, with the pride of noble deeds, with the pride that disdained even to reply to insults so absolutely unmerited.

Oh, how he must have despised her ! He, the peasant, the descendant of serfs, with what contempt he must have looked upon her, the penniless aristocrat, the noble beggar, who turned on the hand that fed her and hers.

Oh, it was horrible !—a burning shame brought the tears into her eyes. She tortured herself with the recollection of all the taunts, the insults, she had, in her blind ingratitude, hurled at this man, who had loaded her and her family with gifts, and in return asked for such a very little love.

The silence which she took to mean shame and remorse was one of unutterable scorn for her. He disdained to explain to her how little he had merited those taunts of cupidity and arrogance. Ilonka remembered that he bore everything silently, until . . . until . . . oh, that was a cruel blow she dealt ! she wondered now what demon had suggested it. He had done so much to win her, and she calmly told him that she loved another. Then only did he say to her that she had gone too far ; then only did the rough peasant's wrath threaten to avenge the bitter insults, and silence for ever the ungrateful tongue.

Oh, why had Etelka then intervened ? Why was not her life allowed to pay the penalty of her odious conduct ? one blow would then have ended the bitter conflict between a man's passion and a woman's pride. Then . . . oh, then . . . the terrible duty would not have been before her which now her very pride compelled her to perform.

A peasant could not outdo an aristocrat in chivalry.

She had wounded him and his pride ; she would make amends. He had made every sacrifice to gain her love ; she would try and give it. Humbled before him, she would ask his forgiveness. She would return to that home from which her cruelty and injustice had driven him that fatal night. She had done a great wrong, but the reparation would be equally great. Love she could not give him. Oh, no ! she had loved once . . . long ago . . . in her early youth, a man who was refined, aristocratic . . . so respectful, when he whispered gently, " Ilonka, I love you," without even daring to touch her hand. Oh, no ! she could never love this man, whose voice was rough, and whose eyes seemed to look into her very soul ; whose strange, wild words made her shudder with an indefinable feeling which *must* be horror. Ilonka remembered his last farewell to her, when his voice had ceased to tremble, and he swore to her that never again would he speak of his dead love to her.

Dead love ? could love be dead ? Hers for the handsome young hussar was surely still alive in her heart. It seemed so cruel to talk of love as dead. No wonder that, when he swore his strange oath, a terrible pain had seized her heart, and had remained there ever since. It was a curious pain, which she could not understand, but which, at times, became unbearable, whenever the sighing of the wind through the poplar trees brought a faint echo of the rugged voice to her ear. Then at night, when the moon shone cold upon the plains, she felt sometimes as if her heart would break. And she always wondered why.

Oh, no ! no ! no ! a thousand times no ! She, Ilonka of Bideskút, the daughter of those who had owned this beautiful land while ages came and went—no ! she

could never love the peasant. But she could be grateful ; she could make amends for her wrongs, and repay by her submission, her obedience—if need be, her deference—the deep debt her family had contracted in her name.

She had strolled out into the garden. The mid-day sun was hot and scorching. Dreamily she wandered down the acacia drive, where the ground was cool and fragrant, covered with a carpet of sweet-scented petals. She looked out through the open gates, and there, far away across the plain, she saw a tiny speck upon the horizon. Her heart beat fast. She was angry with herself, at her own cowardice ; she had nothing to fear. The humiliation would be great, but the greater it was, the more contented would be her pride, for then the greater would be the atonement.

András dismounted at the gate, leaving Csillag to wander at her sweet will, while he walked up the drive to the castle. Ilonka heard him saying farewell to his horse, and telling her he would not be long, just as if the mare was a human creature and his dearest friend. Then she stepped forward.

András did not start. He looked at her so quietly, almost as if he had expected to see her there. Ilonka saw, at once, how very much older he seemed than on the day when he had first kissed her hand. And as he lifted his cap, she saw how grey his hair had turned at the temples. Silently he would have passed, but she said timidly :

“ My father is waiting to see you ; but I came out here, as there is something I wished to say to you. . . . Will you hear it ? ”

He stopped, with his cap in his hand, looking down at her, with a half-vacant look in his eyes, as if his thoughts were very far away.

"If it is necessary," he said, "I will listen."

"I, accidentally . . . to-day . . . for the first time . . . heard something which should never have been kept from me. . . . I . . . I did not understand . . . when I married . . . the terrible position in which my poor father was placed . . . and from which your . . . your . . . generosity rescued him. . . . I . . ."

"Noble lady," he said very quietly, "I must ask you not to distress yourself, or waste your valuable time, in speaking of things that are long past and forgotten. What business dealings I had with my lord I can assure you that he has acknowledged in the way he thought fit."

"Yes! but that is not all," she continued more vehemently, while her cheeks gradually began to glow, "I myself had a great part—one unknown to me—in these dealings. My ignorance blindly led me into what must have seemed to you the basest ingratitude, when . . . when . . . on that night . . . I spoke to you as I did. . . . Believe me . . . I did not know . . . all you had done. . . . Oh, I see it now! how contemptible I must have appeared . . . the shame of it is more than I can bear . . . and now I could not rest . . . till I had told you . . . how infinitely sorry I am. . . ."

She looked exquisitely beautiful as she spoke, with the flush upon her cheeks, her eyes glowing with excitement and tears, looking up at him with the gentlest look *he* had ever received from her.

"I assure you again, noble lady," he said with an effort, "that you distress yourself unnecessarily. The simple services which I had the good fortune to render to your father were such as any man would render

another, if he saw him struggling against a somewhat undeserved fate."

"You are trying to shame me worse," she said, "by depreciating your generosity. It is cruel of you! I have come to you, full of gratitude . . . tardy, perhaps . . . but, nevertheless, truly felt. I had been deceived by my parents, who no doubt thought they acted for the best, but who have caused me to wound you deeply, whom I should have honoured for your kindness and chivalry. . . . Hearing that you were coming to the castle to day, I stole out that I might tell you how . . . "

He put up his hand with the quick commanding gesture so habitual to him.

"Pardon me, noble lady, for interrupting you. There is absolutely no occasion that you should say the words which, I feel sure, in a calmer moment you will bitterly regret. The events of the night to which you refer have faded from my memory. If, as you say, you have some consideration for the few services I rendered your family, might I appeal to it in requesting you to allow this interview to cease, since it must be equally painful to us both?"

He bowed very low, and had turned to go before Ilonka could make the slightest attempt to stop him.

She stood in the drive, beneath the acacia trees, watching his tall figure moving quickly towards the castle. He did not turn once to look behind him, although he must have heard the sob which involuntarily broke through her throat. She watched him till he had disappeared within the castle; then, unreasoningly, blindly, she fled through the gates, down the alley of poplar trees, towards the plain where, at least, she could be alone with her shame and her humiliation.

Oh, what a fool she had been ! Acting on blind, mad impulse, she had humbled her pride before that man, offered him her gratitude, her friendship, and he would have none of it. With absolute scorn he refused to listen to her explanations and to her sorrow ; he despised her too much even to touch her hand. Fool, fool that she was !

What did she think ? what had she hoped ? She knew his love was dead ; he had said so that fatal night. She with her own hand had killed it, and in its place scornful indifference sat, against which she had just bruised her pride. Oh, he knew how to take his revenge ! he had returned insult for insult, taunt for taunt ; his cool contempt had struck her in the face, as once her cruel words must have struck him. She hated him now ten times worse than before, now that he took a pleasure in humiliating her, and in making her suffer, now that she was powerless to wound him, since he did not care. Yes ! of course she hated him, and that was the reason that the pain in her heart seemed more unbearable than it had ever been. She hated him for that indomitable pride, a pride akin to her own ; he, a peasant, dare to be proud—a slave born but to be kicked and despised ! The untamed Magyar blood in her veins boiled with indignation. Her mind tried to conjure up a picture of that man suddenly thrown into bondage, as his ancestors had been, and made to obey humiliating orders, with a rough foreman at his back, who would strike him in the face with a whip if he dared disobey. She gloated on that vision, the abasement of him who had dared to look down at her from some high altitude of inches or of pride, gloated over it till the tears refused to be kept back any longer by wrath, and she threw herself

down, passionately, on the hot, dry soil, and, burying her face in her hands, she sobbed her heart out with shame and with longing.

It was late in the afternoon when she at last roused herself from this passionate weeping. A feeling of utter hopelessness, of the deepest shame, made her long to fly at once from Bideskút. But she was inexperienced; she did not know to whom to turn for help in this terrible emergency. Of course Bideskút must be returned to *him* as soon as possible. Thank God! she yet had the power to return scorn for scorn, and throw back at the feet of the arrogant peasant the rich gifts with which he thought to shame her. Then . . . when that was done, she would go where he could find no trace of her. She would be as dead to him as that vaunted love which did not live a day.

She hoped that she could make him suffer once again. She knew she had wounded him once, but this, he said, he had forgotten. She would try to find the weapon again with which she had struck him that night, and which, in striking, had wrung from him the cry: "Woman, you have gone too far!" She had allowed that weapon to become rusty from want of usage; it was lying by, somewhere, half-forgotten, but she would find it to-morrow, when the walls of Bideskút rung out with gaiety and laughter, and she, as the young matron, the grass widow of the mysterious peasant, would be courted, respected, as *he* now scorned to do. The echo of her merriment, her laughter would reach his ears, the leaves of the poplar trees would repeat the soft words *others* would whisper on moonlight evenings; then, perhaps, though love lay buried, it would rise again from the dead, to suffer bitter agony once more.

She wandered homewards, where she found the house in a whirl of excitement for the coming festivities. Her mother had been anxious about her, and looked suspiciously at her eyes, still swollen with tears. But Ilonka threw herself, with almost feverish energy, into the plans for picnics, parties, and music ; she displayed a keen interest in the list of probable arrivals, and delighted her mother with her eagerness over the new frock she would wear on the morrow.

Bideskúty was in the highest spirits. András had brought him good news and a handful of money. He hoped his daughter would have the good sense to hold her tongue before her mother. Ilonka certainly seemed so eager, so merry, so excited, that the lord of Bideskút quite modified his views as to all women being aggravating.

CHAPTER XXXI

LOVE TRIUMPHANT

NEVER had Bideskút been so full : even the riding-school was converted into a huge dormitory. It was the grandest time the old walls had ever witnessed. Morning, noon, and night there was no interruption to the laughter, the *czigány* music, the dancing, and merry-making. Last year, the terrible cholera epidemic had kept every one away from the county of Heves, but now all that trouble was over. The harvest had been plentiful, the hospitality at Bideskút would be sure to be regal, and every one was burning to see the beautiful heiress, whose mysterious marriage to a rich peasant had consumed every one with curiosity. The mothers with marriageable sons wanted to know if papal dispensation had not already been obtained, and the rich maid, wife, or widow, free once more to contract more congenial ties ; the men, young and old, were ready to flirt with her, now that she had been freed from her mother's apron strings. It was generally supposed that the peasant husband would be kept in the background, and well known that Ilonka had gone to live with her parents the very day after her wedding.

Countess Irma had feared unpleasant questions. In the lowlands of Hungary, where all families are more or less closely related to one another, indiscretion

counts for no crime, and Bideskúty and his wife were well armed against boisterous chaff or covert satire.

The Countess Kantássy, who had married two of her daughters to most eligible *partis*, was inclined to be sadly sympathetic over Ilonka's extraordinary *mésalliance*.

"My dear," she said, "what terrible grief for you! How could you ever give your consent to the horrible match?"

"Ilonka was fretting herself to death," said the mother, with tears in her eyes; "she fancied herself in love with the brute, and would neither eat nor sleep till she had her way about marrying him. We thought, after all, that it was better to see her nominally the wife of a peasant than lying in her coffin."

"I call it unpardonable weakness," asserted an old lady, who was a relation, and, therefore, had a right to express strong views; "young girls do not die so easily. You should have taken her to Budapesth; she would have forgotten such nonsensical follies."

"Gyuri was always so weak, where Ilonka was concerned," said Countess Irma, with a sigh.

"But where in Heaven's name can it end? Are you trying to get papal dispensation?"

"Yes, of course, we shall try to get the marriage broken off. At present the poor child is very happy with us . . . and he is very rich. . . . We never mention his name before her, and . . ."

"She certainly does not look heart-broken at this moment," said Countess Kantássy, looking across the room at Ilonka, who, radiant with youth and beauty, almost boisterous in her gaiety, laughed and chatted, surrounded by a group of men who were, evidently, busy helping the young grass widow to forget that

there existed a mystical husband somewhere in the background.

"That young Madách is as much in love with our Ilonka as ever, I see," said the old aunt.

"After all, my dear," suggested one of the ladies placidly, "here you have the best possible solution out of the difficulty. Young Madách is the best revolver shot in the army. Invite your son-in-law here to see Feri making love to Ilonka. . . . Let him provoke his rival to a duel. . . . Madách can kill the peasant first . . . and step into his shoes afterwards."

"A nobleman cannot fight a peasant," said the Countess dreamily.

"My dear, there are always exceptional circumstances."

"I had never thought of that. Certainly his money would all become Ilonka's after he died."

"Is he, then, so *very* rich?"

"Fabulously, I believe. We never really troubled ourselves as to how much he actually has."

"Of course, Madách has not a silver florin of his own, but that would not matter, if Ilonka is so rich. Think about it, my dear. We will all be very kind to the peasant. Take my advice, and invite him to the castle, or make some arrangements that he shall see Feri devouring the lovely grass widow with his eyes. Those peasants are terribly jealous."

It was after dinner, and the ladies were sipping coffee underneath the verandah. The *czigány* were playing slow, dreamy Hungarian songs outside in the garden. It was the hottest time of the day, and the scorching atmosphere would allow, even to the young people, nothing more active than wandering in the shady parts of the garden. Ilonka had been among the merriest

all day yesterday. She had danced the csárdás half the night through, and allowed Feri to make violent love to her. She hardly realised whither she was drifting, and forced her mind to wander back to the girlish days of two years ago, forgetting the strange and dark shadow which had since then lain across her path. A bitter feeling of revenge and hatred made her heart ache, and she made sacrifice to her pride by forcing herself to flirt, dance, and make merry, in spite of that numbing pain. She half hoped, as she allowed the young man to lead her apart from every one else, down the shady acacia drive, that *he* would come and see her there, in the arms of another man, whom she had loved—as she told him—for two years. She wondered what he would do then ; if he would suffer as she had suffered the last time she had stood in the acacia drive.

She and Feri had reached the great gates ; she looked out upon the alley of poplars, and beyond it, far away upon the plains, beyond which lay the tiny farmhouse where, with her own hands, she had crucified Love, and struck him so bitter a blow with her cruel tongue that he had died, since he could no longer bear the pain.

Wearily she passed her hand over her eyes. The sighing of the poplar trees in the hot noonday air, the distant melancholy cry of the storks, brought back memories of that night in May, and made her heart ache with sorrow and with longing. Feri's voice, as he spoke to her, wearied her. She longed to fly down the sandy road, towards the plains, where the gallop of the wild horses, the flight of the birds overhead, the very sand and rough soil all spoke to her of *him*.

" Ilonka ! "

She started, as the tender, pleading accents of the young man by her side reminded her that he was

there, that she loved him, of course, and that she meant to forget, in that boy and girl love of long ago, the rough storm of passion which had swept over her and left her broken and bruised.

"You must go back," she said, with a nervous little laugh; I believe every one has gone indoors, and we are alone in the garden. What will mama say? The ladies will be so shocked."

"Ilonka!" he said, vehemently, "are you trying to drive me mad? Is this some cruel game you have devised to torture me? All day you . . ."

"Well?" she said, coquettishly, "all day, I what?"

He came very close to her, and tried to take her hand, though she started back a little.

"All day, Ilonka," he whispered, "with every word, with every sigh, you led me to hope that the word which, two years ago, made me so happy, which dwelt in my memory and made my life a paradise, that word you would repeat."

"I do not understand."

"It was two years ago. . . . Do you remember? . . . a hot summer day like this. . . . We were very young, you and I . . . you were a lovely child, and I, then, already worshipped you. . . . Do you remember? . . . You said 'perhaps'!"

Oh, yes! she remembered . . . remembered the delightful thrill she had felt, when the softly whispered ardent words had first reached her ears . . . when first she realised that there was one being in the world who seemed more perfect than all. . . . And now . . . of course, . . . she loved him as dearly as ever . . . she felt the same responsive happiness on hearing his voice whisper again the fond words she had longed for so long. . . . Oh! why did the sighing of those poplar

leaves bring back the echo of that other voice, trembling with passion, masterful, yet so exquisitely tender, which she had silenced for ever?

"Ilonka, you do not answer."

She looked at his eager young face, earnest and pleading, at his slight, graceful, aristocratic figure, his fine, white hands, and a strange mist came across her eyes, for she remembered that tall, picturesque figure which, in this same acacia-scented alley, had looked down with such scorn upon her. Impatiently, she brushed the mist away.

"Ilonka," he pleaded, "God knows that I loved you, for you were an exquisitely lovely child. If He had given you to me, then I would have worshipped and cherished you as the most priceless treasure on earth. But some devils stepped between you and me, and after living for two years on thoughts of that 'perhaps,' Fate tried to change that word into 'never.' I suffered so, Ilonka, I could not have lived had I not seen you again. You are ten thousand times more beautiful than you were . . . and I . . . God help me . . . love you ten thousand times more!"

Half dreamily, she listened to him; through the open windows of the house, the faint sounds of wild Hungarian melodies were wafted on the sweet-scented air.

"I said 'perhaps'," she said; "it was you, and not Fate, who said 'never'!"

"I, Ilonka?"

"Yes, you! they told me you cared for another, that you were married, and . . ."

"And you believed them? Did you not remember, then, that I loved you?"

"Love soon dies."

"Love such as mine never dies, Ilonka!" he said earnestly.

Love never dies? . . . After two years of absence, of weary waiting, he loved her still? And she? . . . oh! of course, she loved him. She had meant to forget, in his arms, the scorn, the contempt, of that other man . . . and yet she felt irritated. The young earnest face, the pleading voice, grated on her nerves. She had always . . . ever since that night in May . . . pictured love like this . . . soft, respectful, and pleading . . . and she wondered why there remained such a chill at her heart.

"Ilonka, won't you speak?"

Wrapped in her thoughts, she had forgotten him; forgotten that he was pleading for that very love she had been so ready to give.

"What must I say?"

"Tell me that that sweet word 'perhaps,' which you spoke as a child, you will repeat, now that you are a woman. That the evil fate which stepped between us is but as a hideous dream, which our love can soon dispel. See Ilonka! the earth is vast, there are other beautiful lands besides our own lovely plains: there we can go, you and I, and take our love with us, securely hidden from the eyes of the world . . . we can, like the birds that, in winter, fly away from the plains, build our nest beneath some other skies . . . Oh, Ilonka . . . if you will say 'perhaps,' . . . if you will grant me leave to make you forget the past . . . I will show you such glimpses of heaven as human beings have never yet dreamed of."

He was covering her hand with kisses, kneeling before her in the lonely acacia alley; she turned her

head away from him towards the poplar trees which were sighing so strangely in the wind.

"Fate has said 'never'!" she said.

"But we can yet say 'perhaps,'" he pleaded. "Ilonka, you were a child. You did not know what you were doing. They forced your will, and dragged you to the foot of the altar, where they made you swear an oath . . ."

"Which, now, you would have me break!"

"You swore it against your will, Ilonka."

"Yet I swore it at the altar, before God and before man. You say you love me, and you would make me base."

"Base only in the eyes of an unjust world. Love makes laws for itself, apart from mankind. I can protect you, Ilonka. What matters it what the world says, since I love you, and if you say—'perhaps'!"

It all seemed so unreal—this thing which she had longed for, which she had pictured to herself as the happiest moment of her life, when her early love would rise triumphant above the dark shadows which had overclouded her life. It seemed like a strange dream, this same acacia alley, the fragrance of the same flowers, and from afar the dying echoes of Magyar love-songs played by the gipsy band.

Beneath these same trees, *he* had turned in contempt from her and her gratitude, and she, forlorn and lonely, had tried to blow on the ashes of another love, only to find that each dying ember, as it flickered, left her more cold and more alone.

"I love you, Ilonka!"

Oh, why did not his voice thrill her? Why did his pleading jar upon her ear like something out of tune? A wicked desire seized her to wound him, too;

to make him suffer as *he* suffered, to goad him into mad, unreasoning passion, which would perhaps revive the handful of burnt ashes on which she tried to blow.

"Feri," she said sadly, "I cannot say 'perhaps.'"

"Why, Ilonka?"

"Because, that love you spoke of, the childlike admiration for the first man who thrills a girl's heart, was not strong enough to battle against Fate. It has sickened during these two years, and, now that I thought to see it revive, I find that it is dead."

"Ilonka, you mistake," he pleaded eagerly; "you are good and sweet, and believe that an oath binds you to another man, and that it is a sin now to listen to my love. But, remember . . . he swore an oath, too . . . he swore to love and honour you . . . but he has broken his vow . . . he has left you . . . he cares nothing for you . . ."

"Stop!" she said; "you have no right to say this. And I have no right to listen."

"You have every right to hear," he pleaded; "your own pride must have told you that he, the peasant, only cared for an aristocratic wife, that he was too gross to appreciate the priceless treasure an all too kind Fate had placed in his arms. He should have guarded and cherished it, as I will guard and cherish you. But, like a blind and ignorant lout, he threw the precious gold away, and is no doubt now forgetting, among the base pleasures of his class, the heavenly happiness which lay for a moment so near his grasp."

She tried to stop him, but he would not hear. He saw the strange look of agony in her eyes, but he did not understand. His arms tried to close round her. He would have drawn her to him.

"Ilonka! as he has forgotten you, so you must try

to forget him. No power in heaven or hell could bind you to an oath which you made against your will. That man is not worthy that you should harbour one thought of duty towards him. Your duty is to yourself, who are born to taste of happiness, to me who have loved you so long, and who still worship at your feet."

He had drawn her to him. With the look of a conqueror he looked down into her eyes. His face was close to hers; she could feel his warm breath upon her cheek. The leaves of the poplar trees beyond the gates sent forth a long, melancholy sigh.

A terrible pity for him seized her: pity for his weakness, pity for his love. Gently she pushed him away from her.

"Feri," she said very quietly, "I seem to have sinned very deeply against you; if, as you say, by look or word, I led you to think that my love for you was not truly dead, then I am indeed sorry, and, in the name of that past love, I must ask you to forgive me."

"I have nothing to forgive, Ilonka. . . . I . . ."

"Do not interrupt me," she said, "I have one thing more to say. It is an appeal to your chivalry. You must promise me . . . that you will forget . . . that I ever listened to words such as you had no right to speak to me . . ."

"I care not for right or wrong, Ilonka; I know that I love you!"

"You must care," she almost pleaded. "We all have to give up some hopes in life. . . . You must give up all hopes of me . . ."

"I cannot, Ilonka; my love for you is my very life."

"It is better," she said earnestly, "to give up life than to do what is base."

"But I will not give you up, Ilonka," he retorted savagely, "for I know that you are unhappy and alone, that I love you, and that he scorns you, who . . ."

"Yes!" she interrupted quietly, "you need not say it. I know that he scorns me. But, nevertheless, in spite of that, I shall keep the oath I made at the altar."

"I will kill him, Ilonka; and then you will be free!"

"Yes," she said dreamily, "then, perhaps, I will be free."

"Till then, give me a word of hope, Ilonka."

"A word of hope? Listen, Feri. In my heart there is an infinite love, and an infinite hatred: when I know which of these two is the stronger, I will speak of love to you."

"Love for me?" he pleaded.

"I cannot say, I do not know."

"Hatred for the peasant, the low-born serf, whom Fate has made your lord?"

"Perhaps . . . I cannot say. . . . But now go. . . . Leave me here a little while. . . . Go—go! I am tired . . . the heat has made me dizzy. . . . I will come back . . . but . . . in Heaven's name, go!"

She was trembling as if with fear, and her hand, which he tenderly raised to his lips, was icy cold. His heart ached for her; but he obeyed her and turned to go.

When he had disappeared down the acacia alley, she also turned and went out at the gates. The road lay parched and arid before her, the hot mid-day air trembled. The vast immensity of the plain lay silent and drowsy before her.

Swiftly she walked down the hard, dry road, riddled by great deep ruts. She felt neither the heat nor the

hardness of the road. On she walked, she knew not whither. Away from that acacia-scented alley, away from that house, those trees, which would not let her forget.

When she reached the edge of the plain, she left the main-road and wandered on upon the soft sand. Far away, from the tumble-down chimney of the little wayside inn, there rose a thin column of smoke. The sky was dense and blue, and on ahead, the line of the horizon, hot and ruddy, was lost in a purple mist. From time to time the wild cry of the herdsmen, driving their herds before them, broke the absolute stillness around, or a flight of cranes, with dismal croaking, would rise, affrighted, at her approach.

On she wandered, hoping, perhaps, that far ahead, where sky and earth met, behind that purple veil, there would lie forgetfulness, for which her heart nearly broke with longing.

Then, as she wandered on, suddenly that veil was lifted, and behind it there arose the glorious picture of fairyland—golden towers and castles, delicious silver streams, trembling as if shaken by fairy breath.

Never had she seen it in such splendour; never had she so longed that the elusive fairy might lend her wings with which she might wander down the silent, solitary streets of that mysterious golden city.

No! Not solitary, for, see! from out one of its golden turreted castles a horse and rider seem to have emerged, and to be coming towards her. Ilonka looked, and her very heart seemed to stand still. Where could she hide, on this vast arid plain, where the orphan's hair alone, or the rosemary, broke the evenness of the sand. . . .

She could not move . . . her feet seemed rooted to

the ground. The rider had not seen her yet, for the August sun was in his eyes, and he held his head down, as if under some heavy load.

Then he dismounted, and, patting the horse gently on the neck, he let it roam about at its own will, whilst he himself came straight towards her.

Suddenly he saw her, standing there before him, white and fragile underneath her broad-brimmed hat, the hot mid-day sun forming a golden aureole round her dainty figure.

Helplessly he, too, looked round him, as if he would have fled. But the plain is vast, and Csillag far away!

He gazed at her, with that strange, far-off look of his, as if he were gazing not at her, but at a dream, while his lips involuntarily parted to breathe her name:

"Ilonka!"

But she put up one tiny hand.

"No! No!" she said, "not now . . . not till the fairy has gone, and taken her lovely picture away. . . . I could not bear cruel words . . . just now!"

She was gazing out towards the brilliant, trembling Fata Morgana afar. And he looked at her, for he did not understand.

"See!" she said dreamily, "there lies, perhaps, the land I seek. . . . They tell me I was born for love and happiness. . . . I have vainly sought both. . . . Once they lay within my grasp . . . with pride and arrogance I pushed them both away. . . . Since then I have wandered alone upon the plain seeking for that which I have lost. . . . Perhaps out there in the fairy palace I shall find the grave of love, and then, the Fairy Morgana, who guards it, will have pity on my weariness, and let me lie down in it to rest."

The air was so still that, from afar, the sound of the tiny bell from the village church sounded silvery and clear, and from the wayside inn there came the echo of merry laughter.

He did not understand her strange, wild words, but only thought how beautiful she looked, with her eyes veiled in tears, and he held his arms tightly crossed over his chest, lest the longing prove too great to clasp her in his arms.

The heat overhead was intense. Her eyes, now, had a wild, scared look; she passed her hand once or twice over her forehead, then looked helplessly at him.

"This is a dream, I know . . . presently I shall wake . . .," she said, "but . . . in the meanwhile we are alone . . . you and I . . . Do not look so strangely at me . . . it *is* a dream, and we shall soon wake up! . . . But, while it lasts . . . take me in your arms once again . . . and . . . perhaps . . . God will be merciful, and the awakening will be only in heaven. . . ."

She had become deathly pale. She staggered for a moment, and almost fell. The next his arms were round her, he had called to her, "Ilonka!" But she put up one tiny hand against his mouth.

"Nay, sweet! my sweet!" she whispered, do not speak. . . . Do you remember . . . you swore a cruel oath that love was dead. . . . Oh, how I have suffered since then! . . . you do not know. . . . Your heart would have ached to see my pain. . . . You must not speak . . . for you might break that oath. . . . But . . . stoop down . . . you are so tall . . . and I want to whisper. . . . My husband! . . ."

"Ilonka!"

Ay, she had said it truly ! it was a dream ! so entrancing, so beautiful, that even the Fairy Morgana's fitful visions seemed pale and dull beside it. He could not speak, for happiness was too great. His arms closed round her. She raised her sweet face up to his, and in her blue, forget-me-not eyes he read at last that love had risen triumphant from the grave.

"Ilonka . . . my love . . . my wife !" he murmured in the midst of half-choked sobs, as his trembling lips sought her sweet mouth in one long, passionate kiss. How long they stayed there, alone betwixt earth and sky, neither knew nor cared. He had fallen on his knees before her, and the strong, rough man, his head buried in the soft, clinging folds of her gown, was sobbing as a weak child, for very happiness.

Then, when he was calmer, she had to tell him all ! Oh, how sweet it was to hear her speak of her love ! She could not say when it was born ; it had always been there, she said ; her cruelty was but an outcome of that very love which her pride had tried to trample down.

When the sun sank down towards the west, and Fata Morgana vanished behind her purple veil, they wandered home towards the farmhouse beyond the *puszta* !

EPILOGUE

AN ! that loveliest of all the days in the year ! that merriest of all the festivals in June ! the feast of our Lord Himself, when, glad with the beauty, the brilliancy of the Hungarian sky, He leaves His dwelling, within the village church, and spends twenty-four hours beneath His own blue vault, safe and snug in a sweet-scented bower of roses, built for Him by rough yet reverent hands, outside in the tiny churchyard.

Roses and jessamine, honeysuckle and rosemary, in gorgeous plenty, form a fragrant altar for this brief dwelling of Our Lord, right in the very midst of His children upon the lowlands, and there He sits, in a sweet nest of white roses, surrounded by the bevy of gaily-decked worshippers, the merry peasants of the tiny village assembled at His feet to-day, not only to worship, but also to see the most gladsome sight it has ever been the good fortune of Árokszállás to witness.

Pater Ambrosius, having read the open-air Mass, and having safely housed his Divine Master among the flowers, is filling a large vessel with holy water. A merry smile plays round the corners of his kindly old mouth. There is eager expectancy on the faces of all, when, hark ! a tiny cry proceeds from the vestry beyond. This is answered by a vociferous shout of "Long live !" as the door of the church opens, and there appears, beneath the porch, my lord Bideskúty Gyuri, in all the gorgeousness of his national attire, carrying

in his arms, somewhat nervously, a tiny bundle, all encased in lace and fine linen. Behind him, Kemény András's kindly face, beaming with happiness and pride, smiles radiantly at the crowd of peasants who have shouted themselves hoarse with "Éljen our András! Éljen our Ilonka!" Close to him the noble Countess, impassive, slightly contemptuous, tries not to look towards the tiny bundle, which, in spite of herself, she constantly does, with an anxious, maternal eye.

Which of the two men is the prouder to-day—the papa, or the godpapa? The latter, though decidedly nervous with the unwonted burden in his arms, looks triumphantly on, as Pater Ambrosius, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, pours a deluge of holy water on the lace bundle, which contains the heir to Bideskút, Kisfalu, and Zárda. Gyuri, András, and a host of other names does the little bundle get, and, finally, a good kiss from the kind Pater, whose throat is so choked that he cannot say anything, but grasps András's hand and that of my lord, and finally takes out his handkerchief and blows his nose vigorously.

Then, when the ceremony is over, and the heir to all the wealth and all the lands is richer by the promise of the heavenly heritage, there is more cheering, more shouting. Every one talks at once, every one wants to see the son of András, their own András, and of the gentle lady who has been their good angel through sad times, and who has brought the happy laugh to András's throat once more, and caused his cheering voice to be heard again from one end of the village to the other. Presently, there is a loud jingle of bells, a sound of wheels, and the gorgeous turn-out, with its

bright-red leather harness and silver bosses, and drawn by five milk-white thoroughbreds, draws up before the church porch, to convey the heir of Bideskút, Kisfalu, and Zárda back to his farmhouse home.

András, proudly carrying the precious burden, tries to thank them all for their welcome. He is longing to be home again, in the small, lonely house by the plain, where the proud descendant of a hundred chieftains awaits her peasant lord with a smile of infinite love.

And when he comes home, and places the tiny bundle close to her; when he kneels beside her and folds her tenderly in his arms; when, through a mist of happy tears, his eyes tell her, more clearly than words, "I love you, Ilonka!" then there is before her such a golden vision—which is a reality—that before it the Fairy Morgana's pictures appear but pale and cold.

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